Elephant

Jan Lavrinovski

All rights reserved

Contents

Docklands....1
Calcutta....8
Macau Coast....20
Fields of Red....27
1806....49
Burma....60
Suhani....72
Calcutta, Late 1816....77
Calcutta, Late 1817....80
London, 1820....86
Brand....102
Somewhere on the road north, India, 1840....127
Afghanistan....130

Docklands

London, 1800

The air down at the docks was black with soot and salt. Men shouted over the clatter of iron hooks and creaking hemp ropes, boots thudding against the wood planks slick with yesterday's rain. Crates, barrels, and chests were being winched up from the bellies of moored ships, and every load swung like a coffin on a rope. Charles had been up since before the bell rang, shoulders already aching, shirt stuck to his back, palms raw from rope-burn. He moved with the others, quiet but watchful. Twenty years old, wiry, pale from years without clean air, he was stronger than he looked, though not from choice.

He ducked under the arm of a shouting foreman and passed the side of the *Indiaman*, where a stack of sealed chests waited on the gangplank. Each was marked with a black ink sigil — familiar to him now — the kind reserved for Company opium from Calcutta. Charles set his shoulder against one and lifted it with a groan. He knew how many were there. He knew where the count was written. He knew who bothered to check and who didn't.

Later, behind a stack of crates near the rear warehouse wall, he cracked one of the opium chests open with the claw of his hammer. The smell hit him instantly — sweet and sour, like burnt syrup and sweat. He reached inside, careful, and pulled out a sealed pouch wrapped in oilskin and cotton. Smooth in his hand, it weighed almost nothing. He looked both ways, slipped it into a satchel under his coat, and hammered the chest shut again.

By the time his shift ended, his body was shaking. Not from fear — that part was long gone — but from fatigue. He walked the length of the dock toward the east, stepping into the mud streets of Whitechapel as fog began to thicken. A few children darted past him barefoot, yelling, chased by dogs. A woman was shouting something from a window about lice and stealing bread.

He reached the corner of Chick Lane, where the walls wept with moisture and the cobbles were cracked open like old teeth. A man leaned against a doorway, wrapped in a gray wool coat stained at the cuffs, eyes twitching from side to side. This was Ned Finch, thin-faced, crooked smile, eyes too bright.

Charles stepped in without greeting and pulled the package from his coat.

“Careful, it’s wrapped tight. Sell it clean. No talk. You take thirty. I don’t haggle,” Charles said.

Ned took the pouch with both hands like it was communion.

“Don’t worry, mate,” he grinned. “Got two dockers and a widow from Silk Street already whisperin’ for it. I’ll have it gone before the moon’s up.”

“You don’t smoke it,” Charles said flatly, “I hear you do, I pull your tongue out and feed it to your ma.”

Ned laughed, tucked the pouch inside his coat, and nodded.

“I ain’t like them slummers, Charley. I’ve got taste.”

“You’ve got rotten gums and a bastard for a landlord. Just keep it movin’.”

Ned stepped off into the fog, already whistling. Charles turned back, boots heavy with slush. At the corner he looked up at a dying gas lamp, then down at his hands — blistered, blackened, trembling.

“This can’t go on,” he muttered to himself. “I’ll be bent like them by thirty. I need out. Need more.”

Behind his eyes, the vision returned: a ship of his own, with no foreman’s whip, no freezing dawn, no counting someone else’s gold. Opium, yes — but not by the pouch. By the **ton**. From Calcutta to Canton, with his name on the manifest and his boots dry.

But for now, tomorrow would bring the same pain. Same crates. Same fog. Same hunger.

The fog hadn’t lifted by the time Ned reached the old butcher’s stall on Thrawl Street, long since abandoned and now his favored place to do business. Blood still stained the stone slabs beneath the counter, though no carcass had hung there for years. He pulled the

package from under his coat, placed it on the slab, and unwrapped it carefully. The rich, sticky scent of opium rose at once. He grinned.

From the corner came Bran and Doyle, two dockers with faces like bruised bread and hands like hammers. They shuffled over, coughing from the damp.

“About time,” Bran muttered. “You said you’d have the parcel last week.”

“I’ve got it now, don’t I?” Ned snapped. “And it’s clean. From the docks, not the shite you lot boil in kettles behind the tavern.”

Doyle leaned in, sniffed, and nodded. “How much?”

“One and six a packet,” Ned said, tearing the pouch into thirds and wrapping each piece in waxed cloth. “One for you. One for you. Other’s promised to the widow.”

Bran grunted. “That’s dear.”

Ned leaned forward. “It’s not dear, it’s proper. You know how much they pay in Canton? And it’s gettin’ harder to nick from the docks. You want in, pay up.”

They both dropped coins into his palm. One shilling and sixpence per packet was not much — but Ned moved it fast, and fast mattered more than full price.

An hour later, the Silk Street widow arrived — Mara, small woman with sharp shoulders and broken fingernails, wrapped in a once-white shawl. She didn’t speak. Just paid and tucked the bundle into her bodice. She sold to seamstresses, servants, shopgirls. Quiet customers.

By evening, Ned returned to the warehouse edge where Charles waited behind the stacked timbers. His shirt was soaked through again, the skin on his shoulders peeling raw under canvas.

“All sold,” Ned said, handing over the coins. “Four and six total. That’s three and twopence for you, one and four for me.”

Charles counted it silently and nodded. “You’re fast.”

Ned grinned. “I’m greedy. That helps.”

“You’re still only gettin’ thirty. Tell your friends.”

“I’ll tell ‘em,” Ned said, walking off. “Just be ready with more tomorrow.”

Charles watched him go. The coins were warm in his hand, but not enough. Not nearly.

“One crate earns me a week’s wage,” he muttered. “But it takes too long. I need thirty crates. I need a fockin’ ship.”

The next morning at the docks, Charles was slower to lift. His limbs throbbed, his neck ached like stone grinding stone. But there were no choices — just crates and frost and shouted names. He watched for the mark on the chests and pried open one behind the others. Inside — not opium. Instead, a box of ivory combs, fine-toothed, smoothed with polish, dozens stacked in blue cloth. He whistled softly.

“Better than nothing,” he muttered, slipping a stack of six into his coat.

Later, during the midday haul, he turned to an older man named Garrick, a toothless deckhand with inked knuckles and a thousand sea miles behind him.

“You ever been to Calcutta?”

“Twice,” Garrick said, squinting. “Why?”

“What’s the fare?”

Garrick scratched his beard. “Depends if you sail or stink in steerage. Passage on a Company ship — eight to ten pounds. Less if you sleep with the rats and don’t eat.”

Charles nodded. That was a number. He needed at least ten.

By twilight, he slipped away and sold the ivory combs to a street hawker near the pump at Dead Ox Yard. **Five shillings** for the lot. The hawker grinned and held up one to the light.

“These’ll do nice for the lasses,” he said. “You got more, I’ll take it.”

Charles didn’t answer. He took the coins and walked home.

Whitechapel waited like a wound that wouldn’t scab. He climbed three flights of rotten stairs to his room — a sagging space the size of a cupboard, lit by a half-used candle stuck in a bottle. The floor creaked under every footstep, the window let in nothing but mildew, and the mattress was a pile of old straw in a canvas sack.

He took off his boots and sat down with a groan. The stink of piss and boiled cabbage drifted from the room below. He pulled the blanket over himself and lay flat, eyes open in the dark.

“I’ll buy my way out,” he thought. “Another week. Maybe two. Then India. Then everything.”

Below, someone was crying. Rats scrabbled in the wall. He didn’t care.

He stared at the ceiling until the candle died.

Four months passed like rust creeps — slow, biting, and permanent. Charles’s body hardened, but not by will. His palms cracked and bled, wrapped in cheap linen by night and reopened each morning on the rope. The crates never grew lighter, the shouting never

lessened, and the stink of river rot clung to his lungs. Each day he cursed the dock, the men, the wood, the salt, and the God who made him too poor to choose another life.

But he watched. He stole when he could — more opium, though guarded now, and odd items when luck allowed: a bundle of copper pans, four silken scarves from a miscounted crate, a small chest of combs, and once, a rusted pistol he never loaded. He sold it all through Ned and the hawker in Dead Ox Yard. In the back of his room in Whitechapel he kept his earnings in a hollow under the floorboard, wrapped in an old shirt — just over ten pounds, enough for a steerage passage to Calcutta and food to last the trip.

On the last night, he packed. A sack with loaves of hard bread, dried apples, a small bottle of laudanum, one bottle of whiskey, a wedge of old cheese, and his best shirt — which only had one tear and buttons mostly intact. His coat was patched at the elbow, and his boots had been resoled with an old belt. He ran a comb through his hair, looked in the cracked mirror, and spat.

Before dawn, he walked to the dock carrying his life in one bag. The ship loomed in the fog like a drowned church, its masts vanishing into mist. She was called The Cormorant, her hull blackened and ribs groaning in the tide.

“Name?” barked a red-nosed sailor at the gangway.

“Charles Harker. Passage booked,” he said, holding up a folded note and coin stub.

The man squinted, grunted, and waved him on. “Below with the rats.”

Charles stepped aboard, boots ringing on wet planks, and followed a sour-lanterned man down a creaking stair. The air below was warm and foul, thick with the breath of thirty men crammed into bunks of swinging cloth, stacked hammocks tied to low beams, barrels stacked like bones. He found an open strip — a sagging canvas sling between two posts, stained with old sweat, but stable.

“This’ll do,” he muttered.

Around him, other men snored, muttered, or stared. He lay back, feet hanging slightly off the edge, and held his bag to his chest like a shield. The ship creaked and moaned like a dying beast. Rats scurried. He closed his eyes, hand on the whiskey bottle.

The voyage began at sunrise.

The first day was all motion. Ropes snapping, gulls screaming, sails flapping like thunder. The ship surged forward, the river widening, then turning gray-blue with open sea. Charles stayed below deck most of the day, waiting for the sickness to pass. He did not speak. Around him, men vomited, prayed, cursed their luck, or drank until they passed out.

At supper, a lad named **Ewan**, pale and red-haired, slid onto the floor near him with a tin bowl of salted fish.

“You from London?” the boy asked, chewing.

“Whitechapel.”

“God help you,” Ewan muttered.

“No one did,” Charles replied.

“Why Calcutta, then?”

“Money.”

“Course it is,” Ewan said, picking a bone from his teeth. “Just don’t die on the way. That bed you’re in — three died in it last season.”

Charles stared at the ceiling. “Better men have died in worse beds.”

On the second day, he climbed to the deck. The sea stretched in all directions, pale gray under clouds, and the wind slapped his coat like a bully. He stood there for half an hour, just breathing.

A sailor passed him carrying a rope coil. “First time at sea?” the man asked.

Charles nodded.

“You look like you ain’t cried yet. That’s better than most.”

“I’ll cry when I own one of these bastards,” Charles said.

The sailor laughed and kept walking.

Later that night, Charles lay in his sling listening to the ship groan and creak, watching the shadows sway above him, and whispered, “India’s closer now. A few more weeks.”

He drank a sip of whiskey, closed his eyes, and dreamed of fire-colored poppies blooming in endless rows.

Below deck, the air was warm and wet, heavy with sweat, mildew, and the breath of unwashed men. Charles lay in his canvas sling, knees slightly bent, arms crossed over his chest, the ship creaking around him like a great sleeping beast. He pulled his sack closer, untied the bottle of whiskey, and opened the stopper with a thumb. From the inside pocket of his coat, he took out the small glass vial of laudanum, uncorked it with care, and let ten dark drops fall into the liquor. The scent rose bitter and sweet, and he swirled it once before taking a mouthful.

The warmth spread down his throat, and within minutes the sea's sway no longer stirred nausea in his gut. The sickness, the weight of the damp — all dulled under the slow fire curling inside him.

From across the hammocks came heavy steps, not rushed, but deliberate — like a man who never needed to run. A massive figure loomed into view and ducked beneath the low beams, broad-shouldered, neck thick as rope. His fists were the size of shovels, and his beard had gone gray in streaks around the jaw. He had a jagged scar across one cheek like a rope burn gone bad. He stopped beside Charles, sniffed once.

“That whiskey?” he asked, voice low, guttural.

Charles nodded, gripping the neck of the bottle.

“You sharing, or keeping it for your ghosts?”

Charles hesitated. Then passed it over, not out of fear — though there was enough reason — but from instinct. The man took it without a word and drank half in a single swallow. His throat worked like an ox chewing, then he gasped, coughed once, and laughed — a dry bark like wood snapping.

“Not bad. Got a kick. What's your name?”

“Charles. Harker.”

“Alfred Blake,” the man said, dropping to the floor beside the sling, legs outstretched. “Londoner, are you?”

“Whitechapel.”

“Place where boots get nicked while you're still wearing 'em,” Alfred muttered.

Charles allowed himself a small smile. “That's the place.”

“What're you after in Calcutta, then?”

Charles looked up at the crossbeam above. “Trade. I’ve seen enough crates in London. Thought I’d try packing my own.”

Alfred snorted. “You’re green. You’ve got the smell of rope and sweat still on you.”

“Still got my teeth, too,” Charles replied, looking over.

The man laughed, a rough noise. “Fair enough. I work with some lads in Calcutta. Smugglers, mostly. Goods from inland, sometimes from further east — Canton, Malacca. We got our own vessel. Not a clipper, but she moves. Been to London more than once with cargo your Customs never sees.”

Charles raised an eyebrow. “Where do you stay in Calcutta?”

“Company's End, just off the docks. You’ll smell it before you see it. A long house with a crooked blue shutter and a drunk on the step. They don’t ask questions, and they don’t mind knives.”

Charles nodded. “I’ll remember it.”

Alfred glanced at him, squinting through the dim. “So you got a plan, Charles, or just blowin’ with the tide?”

“I’ve got a bit of coin,” Charles said. “and some ideas.”

“Ha!” Alfred barked, slapping his knee. “You’re a bloody fortune hunter. Thought I’d seen the last of your kind.”

Charles didn’t answer. He swirled the whiskey in the bottle, watching the light catch in its gold.

Alfred leaned back, arms crossed. “Don’t worry, boy. Calcutta’s full of rogues and rats. You’ll fit in one way or the other. Just mind the knives and don’t trust a man with perfect teeth. You find me in Company’s End when you’re done beggin’. I might have something for you.”

Then he stood, cracked his neck once, and lumbered away into the dark of the hold.

Charles took another sip, let the laudanum burn slow behind his eyes, and lay back.

“Company’s End,” he whispered. “Let’s see what ends there.”

Calcutta

The voyage lasted just over three months, though to those crammed below deck, time moved like molasses in winter. The Cormorant crawled across the Bay of Biscay, skirted Portugal’s coast, rounded Africa’s horn, and cut across the vast steaming belly of the Indian Ocean. The passengers — the poor, the mad, the broken — endured it in a mix of sweat, rot, and silence, broken only by moans and muttered prayers.

Men vomited in corners, their stomachs empty by the third week. The water turned sour, green with floating scum. Bread went moldy, dried meat stank like piss, and the rats grew bold, chewing through sacks in the dark and stealing food from hands that slept too deep. Twice they were caught in storms — first off the Cape, then again near the Nicobar Islands — monstrous winds tearing at the sails, waves slapping the hull like God's fist. The hold pitched and buckled, and screams echoed in the black.

A woman with a child, wrapped in a wool shawl, cried most nights. Her boy coughed blood the second month. No one asked if he made it.

Charles slept through most of it. The laudanum-whiskey dulled the hunger, and the stench no longer stung. When weather cleared, he climbed to the deck, breathing the sea air with relief. He shared whiskey with a pair of Irish laborers, both missing teeth, and once with an old salt who'd sailed to Singapore and back and had stories for every scar.

One morning in the seventh week, Charles watched as Alfred got into a shouting match with a Scotsman over a heel of bread. The Scotsman refused to share. Alfred didn't argue twice. He stood, cracked his knuckles, and punched the man once in the face. The sound was like wet wood snapping. The Scotsman dropped. Alfred took the bread, sat down on a barrel, and chewed in silence while the others stared.

By the time the shores of India came into view, most on board were half-mad with heat and hunger. The Hooghly River twisted inland like a dirty ribbon, the banks thick with jungle and huts, then clay houses, then larger stone buildings behind high walls. The Cormorant drifted into Calcutta's port, where rowboats swarmed like flies and the smell of burning wood, open drains, and spices hit Charles like a slap.

Alfred was gone by the time Charles got topside. No goodbye. Just an empty sling and missing sack. Charles walked down the gangplank alone, carrying his single bag, stepping into heat so thick it blurred the air. He blinked under the sun and looked around.

People stared at him — dark-skinned men in cotton robes, barefoot children, porters shouting in Bengali, palanquin bearers and Company clerks in coats too thick for the climate. The sounds were endless — shouting, bells, the creak of wheels, the thud of bare feet. English was rare. Most of what he heard was Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, and other dialects that fell on his ears like water over stone. A few faces smiled. Others scowled. Most looked through him, curious or indifferent, like a beast fresh from its cage.

He wandered the wide road toward Tank Square, pushing past carts and oxen, following the bigger buildings. He asked a tea vendor in slow English, "Opium… where?"

The man squinted and pointed down a side lane, saying something fast in Bengali. Charles nodded, though he understood nothing.

Later, near Bentinck Street, a boy approached him and pulled at his sleeve. "You want smoke?" the boy said, grinning. "Come. Baba waits."

Charles followed into a side alley where the smell of incense and dung clung to the walls. A narrow room opened behind a curtain. Inside, a man sat cross-legged on a mat, bare-chested, with a long ivory pipe in hand. His beard was yellowed, eyes bloodshot. He grinned, gestured for Charles to sit, and handed him the pipe.

“No, no,” Charles said, raising his hands. “I mean… buy. Not smoke. I want… where… bigger quantity… who sells?”

The man tilted his head, confused. From behind the curtain, another voice came.

“How much you carry?”

A second figure stepped in. Mid-thirties, skin dark, eyes sharp, Kerpal was lean, dressed in a dhoti and British-style shirt, with sandals made of wood. He carried a cloth sack, from which he pulled out a solid one-pound ball of opium, wrapped in dried leaves.

Charles’s eyes lit up. “Good, good… I don’t want to buy now. I ask… where you got it?”

Kerpal eyed him with curiosity. “Bihar. Or Bengal. Depends season. Poppy comes from village. Company takes most. British East India Company. You go see them — Fort William. Very big.”

Charles nodded slowly. “They sell?”

Kerpal shrugged. “Auction. But for sahibs. For trade. Not like this.” He held up the opium ball again. “This is ground work. We make, we dry, we ship. You want big? You go Company side.”

Charles sat down, legs sore, heartbeat slow. The old guru passed the pipe again. This time, Charles took it, held it, and inhaled lightly. The smoke was bitter, earthy, thick as syrup. His chest warmed. His shoulders eased.

He looked at Kerpal. “Where can I find you again?”

“I stay near Lalbazar, behind police house. Ask for Kerpal. Many know me.”

Charles nodded, stood slowly, and stepped out into the burning light. The streets twisted around him, heat crawling under his clothes, voices coming from all sides, and every face strange.

He wandered for hours, not speaking, not thinking, just moving. His breath shallow. His legs dull. The world softening at the edges.

By dusk, he returned to the docks and sat on a crate, watching the water sway and blacken with night. The smell of the sea was different here — thicker, like blood in water.

Charles waited as the sun slipped low and the heat began to bleed from the stones. The dusk breeze off the Hooghly brought no cool, only the scent of wet wood, ash, and dried fish. At the edge of the port, lanterns burned orange above piers where men muttered in half a dozen tongues. He sat on a crate watching the shadows stretch long between the warehouses, then stood and began to walk.

The docklands of Calcutta were lined with great timber structures, stone-footed, their sides weathered by monsoon and sun. Rope coils, barrels, carts, and discarded hemp sacks cluttered the alleys. Some ships swayed beside the piers, dark shapes tied like beasts at anchor. Charles moved quietly, slipping between shadows.

Ahead, he saw a long warehouse with a lazy guard strolling the far end, stick tapping the ground, shoulders slumped. Charles watched him pass, then approached the door. He pressed against it — locked from inside. To the left, a shuttered window sat half a man's height from the ground. He tested it. Stuck. Then he spotted a rusted iron rod, maybe once a crowbar or tool, lying in a pile of rope ends and broken crates.

He slid it under the frame and leaned his weight down. The wood groaned, cracked — then gave with a soft pop. He opened the window fully and climbed in, landing with a soft grunt.

Inside it was dark, but not blind. Faint moonlight filtered through the shutters. Dust hung in the air like fog. He moved slowly past crates marked in black ink — JUTE, LAC, RAW SILK, SALT PETER, COTTON — and stacks of dried bamboo mats tied with twine. A broom and tin bucket lay beside a pile of coir rope. He tripped, cursed under his breath, and fell hard against the planks, dust puffing from his coat.

He rose, brushing himself off, ears alert. No movement. Far at the end, he saw a partition wall and three narrow rooms built inside the warehouse — likely offices. He crept between crates until he reached a door slightly ajar.

Inside, a desk sat crooked beneath a slatted window. Two wooden chairs, a sagging armchair with stuffing showing, and a table with a rusted ashtray holding a long-dead cigar butt. The air smelled of tobacco and dried ink. He stepped in, went to the desk, and pulled the drawers.

Loose papers — cargo lists, ledgers in Bengali and English. Receipts for jute bales, dates for shipment to Bombay. The bottom drawer was locked.

Charles pulled his knife and wedged the blade against the wood seam. With a twist and jerk, the drawer cracked open. Inside: more papers, a small tin box with a padlock. He placed it on the desk and forced the tip of his knife under the lock until the catch gave. The lid sprang open.

He stared: a dozen silver rupees, several notes in Company-issued paper currency, and some coin rolls marked in both English and Persian. Altogether, maybe fifteen pounds in value. He pocketed it, shut the lid, pressed the lock closed until it clicked back into place, and returned everything as it was. Then he slipped from the office, retraced his steps, and climbed out the window, shutting it tight behind him.

The docks were quieter now. He passed one warehouse after another until he spotted a large structure set apart from the rest, flanked by flagpoles and a small guard hut.

Painted across the side, fading but legible: BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY – CALCUTTA WAREHOUSE.

He waited, listening. No voices. No light inside. He approached the side window. The same rusted bar was still in his coat strap. He slid it beneath the sill, pressed — crack — and the window eased open. He climbed in.

This warehouse was larger, better built, the air thick with the smell of wood, spice, and earth. Crates were stacked high and labeled with stenciled marks: RICE, INDIGO, COFFEE, CINNAMON, PEPPER, COTTON BALES, BIRCHWOOD, and more. He wandered deeper, eyes scanning. Toward the back, a cluster of crates bore only a red wax seal — no writing.

He pried one open.

Inside were round opium balls, each wrapped in poppy leaves and pressed into layers of dried clay and oilskin. The smell hit his nose instantly — sweet and pungent. He reached in, took one full ball, heavy as a fist, and tucked it into his bag. He closed the crate again, pressed the lid down, and walked back the way he came, slipping out of the window and setting it shut.

He walked along the muddy dock road until he reached a weathered tavern tucked behind a palm tree and a string of hanging lanterns. A wood sign swung above the door: "Naya Daur". The smell of fried onions and smoke drifted through the shutters.

Inside, oil lamps lit the room in gold flicker. A few sailors drank in silence. A Tamil man played cards with two Afghan porters in the corner.

Charles approached the barkeep, a thin man with a turban and a half-missing moustache.

“Room. Food. Whiskey.”

“Five annas for room. Two for food. Bottle — full rupee,” the man said without looking up.

Charles paid with rupee and a few coins, then carried his bottle and food — a bowl of rice, lentils, fried eggplant — to a corner table. He ate slow, watching the room, ears tuned to half-English, half-Bengali murmurs.

When the bottle was half gone, he climbed the stairs to a crooked wooden room with a rope bed and palm mat. A window looked over the rooftops, the city asleep beneath stars.

He locked the door, lay on the mat, his bag at his side, and smiled in the dark.

He had money. He had opium. And he had begun.

Morning in Calcutta came with heat already rising off the stone and the sharp cries of crows echoing across the rooftops. Charles stirred on the rope bed, sweat sticking his shirt to his back, the room thick with stale air and smoke drifting in through the shutter. He rubbed his

face, sat up slowly, and splashed water from the clay basin near the window onto his neck and arms. The cool hit hard and fast, chased by the stench of the street below.

He changed into his spare shirt, slung his bag over his shoulder, and walked downstairs to the tavern hall. A few early drinkers slouched over their cups. One old sailor was passed out on a mat with flies crawling over his beard. The barkeep glanced up.

“Food. Beer,” Charles said, placing two coins on the counter.

He ate a bowl of flatbread, lentils, and onion pickle, washing it down with a light local beer, bitter and sour but cold enough. He ate slowly, watching the sun stretch longer shadows across the floor, then stood and stepped out into the street, the heat pressing against his chest like wet cloth.

He walked northward, past Tank Square, then east toward Lalbazar, where the narrow lanes turned crooked and louder. Behind the Calcutta police house, past a string of carts and vendors selling beetle leaf and tobacco, he found the narrow door where Kerpal had said to come.

He knocked.

The door opened. Kerpal stood there, barefoot, grinning, a streak of ash on his brow from some morning prayer.

“Heeey, friend,” he said. “Already back?”

Charles nodded. “Business.”

Kerpal laughed and stepped aside. “Come, sit.”

The room was simple — bare walls, mat on the floor, low table, the smell of old smoke and ghee hanging in the air. A small fan creaked in the corner. Charles dropped his bag onto the mat and sat cross-legged. From the bag he pulled the one-pound opium ball, wrapped in leaf and cloth, and placed it on the table.

Kerpal tilted his head. “You stole it?”

“Borrowed,” Charles said. “Who buys it?”

Kerpal chuckled. “Why you want sell? You have so little. Smoke it.”

“I need coin,” Charles said. “I need to move fast.”

Kerpal leaned back, rubbing his chin. “I have source. I don’t buy. It comes cheap, cheaper than tea in some weeks. You want to sell opium here?” He laughed. “Try tourists. Foreign fools pay more than locals. Maybe sell it to missionary. Say it is medicine.”

Charles didn’t laugh.

Kerpal leaned forward. “One man… one English man. He buys sometimes. Price is foolish. But he pays. Come, we go.”

They stepped back into the heat, walking down alleys choked with rickshaws and smoke, past sari shops and butcher stalls, beggars with burnt feet, and perfume sellers with trays of oils. After twenty minutes, they reached a stone house with shutters painted green. Kerpal knocked twice, waited.

A servant opened. A short exchange in Bengali, then they were let inside. The house was cool, fan-powered, quiet. A man emerged from the inner room — tall, balding, sunburned, a cravat tucked into his shirt, spectacles dangling from a cord.

“This is Charles. New in town,” Kerpal said, “and he has something familiar to show you.”

Charles unwrapped the opium ball and placed it on the table.

The Englishman raised an eyebrow. “Good weight. Decent leaf. What's the price?”

Charles glanced at Kerpal.

Kerpal shrugged. “Give him six rupees. That’s high.”

The man handed over six silver rupees — about twelve shillings, not even a full pound sterling. Charles pocketed it and gave a tight nod.

Afterward, as they walked back toward Lalbazar, Charles spoke.

“So opium’s worthless here.”

Kerpal smiled. “Not worthless. But cheap like dirt. It is made here, my friend. You sell sand in a desert.”

“Then where’s the profit?”

Kerpal pointed east. “Canton. Singapore. Batavia. Or… your London. That’s where the fools pay.”

Charles rubbed his face. “You helped me. Why?”

Kerpal smiled, walking ahead. “You gave me good laugh. And you didn’t lie when you said you stole it.”

Charles said nothing.

The city swirled around him — wheels clacking on stone, bells ringing from temple towers, the scent of cumin and urine and dung hanging thick. He kept walking, the coin in his pocket cold and light.

Charles leaned forward, resting his elbows on Kerpal's floor mat. The smell of charred mustard oil hung in the room. Outside, the street dogs were barking again, as they always did in Lalbazar when dusk fell.

"I need some men," Charles said quietly. "Ten to fifteen. I'll pay."

Kerpal blinked, leaned back, eyebrows raised. "That many? For what?"

Charles didn't answer at first. He looked past Kerpal to the shuttered window, then back at him.

"I'll tell you later. Just make sure they show up at the *Naya Daur* tavern. Midnight. Friday. That's two nights from now. They'll need to bring pots of white paint. As many handcarts as they can get their hands on."

Kerpal narrowed his eyes. "What is this?"

"Don't worry. Nobody's getting hurt. It's work."

Kerpal smirked and shook his head. "Work… in the middle of the night? At a tavern full of whores and gin? I should start charging for introductions."

"You'll be paid too," Charles added, standing.

Kerpal shrugged. "Men are easy to find. Calcutta breathes cheap labor. They'll come."

Charles nodded. "Good. Midnight sharp."

He left the house, walking through the curled alleys and wet stone backstreets toward *Naya Daur*. Heat still clung to the walls, though the sun had long since dropped behind the buildings. When he reached the tavern, it buzzed with low voices and the occasional bang of a mug on wood. He climbed the stairs to his room, took a bottle from his sack, and drank three swallows of whiskey without pause. The burn steadied him.

Later, he came down to the bar, asked the keeper for a few pence of tobacco, and was handed a clay pipe, cheap and pale, along with a folded twist of rough-cut leaf. He packed it, lit it, and sat back on a stool while the smoke rose in slow, dancing coils. The barkeep said nothing. He'd seen stranger men than Charles walk through his doors.

In the evening, Charles ate again — lentils, curried potatoes, and a boiled egg — then returned upstairs to rest.

Friday arrived thick with cloud and damp heat. The air felt swollen. By midnight, Charles stepped outside, pipe in one hand, his old coat thrown over his shoulders. Near the tavern entrance stood a cluster of dark-skinned men, thin-armed, sharp-eyed, wrapped in dhotis or worn trousers, some barefoot, some with sandals made from tyre scrap. They were

whispering and swatting flies, looking around uncertainly. None spoke English beyond a few words.

Charles walked up and gestured with a nod. “Come. With me.”

They followed without question, like they would any man holding coin. The walk was quiet but fast. Down to the port, past the sleeping oxen, past the boatmen snoring beneath tarpaulins. They reached the British East India Company warehouse, still and silent in the warm night.

Charles ducked behind a stack of crates where he had earlier hidden the metal bar, still rusted, still solid. He jammed it under the window shutter and popped it open with one sharp crack. He climbed in, the same as before, and this time slipped straight to the interior sliding door that separated the warehouse from the outside. A thick metal lock hung from its brace. He wedged the bar behind it, twisted with all his strength, and it snapped free with a sharp metallic groan.

The men waited outside, murmuring.

Charles opened the door and stepped out. “I forgot the keys,” he said flatly, waving off any suspicion. “Doesn’t matter now. Come in.”

They followed.

Inside, he led them to the back of the warehouse, where crates bearing the Company’s seal sat in tidy rows. He pointed. “Take these. Load them on the handcarts. Fast. To the docks.”

The men hesitated a moment, then set to work.

Crate after crate was lifted — some by two men, some by three — hoisted onto the carts and rolled through the open door and out into the streets, wheels thumping softly over stone. Charles barked low commands to keep the pace. He counted forty crates moved before pausing.

“Paint,” he said, gesturing to two of the men who carried small clay pots of whitewash and brushes hacked from palm fibers. “These. Here.” He pointed to the stamped letters — British East India Company — and made a swiping gesture.

The men understood. They dipped the brushes and began to coat the letters with thick white paint, sloppy but effective. Each box lost its mark beneath crude layers of drying lime. The carts kept moving.

Charles stood in the open warehouse door, scanning the road. He wiped his brow, his hand black with dust and paint streaks.

Then came a voice — sharp, firm, in Bengali. A guard, middle-aged, mustached, lantern in hand, approached, frowning.

He asked something — likely what Charles was doing.

Charles stepped toward him, trying to look casual. “Company work. Night shift. Manager’s orders.”

The guard didn’t seem convinced. He stepped closer, eyeing the carts and paint buckets. He said something else — faster, more aggressive.

Charles didn’t wait. He stepped forward and punched the man square in the jaw. The sound was muffled by beard and muscle, but the man dropped like a sack. Charles dragged him quickly behind a stack of raw jute bales and let him lie there.

When the last crate was gone, Charles gave each man a few annas — the going rate for night labor, not generous, but fair by slum standards. The men nodded, some even smiled, and left back toward their quarters, carts empty, paint-smeared.

At the docks, the forty crates now sat in a neat pile near a shaded wall, where mold crept up the bricks and rats skittered. The two painters finished brushing the last letters into oblivion. Charles handed them each a coin, sent one off and asked the other to stay on guard.

He lit his pipe, drew a slow breath, and looked at the stack of unmarked crates in the dark.

It was done.

Charles didn’t linger in the shadows of the port. With his hands still flecked in white paint and the taste of tobacco bitter on his tongue, he made straight for Company’s End, moving fast through the narrow lanes, ignoring the rats that darted through puddles and the beggars curled under temple walls. The heat hadn’t lifted. The air was thick as wet canvas.

The building loomed at the end of a trash-choked alley — a sprawling, peeling beast of a structure, wide as a warehouse but stacked with communal rooms and drink-sick men. Shutters hung crooked. From one window, a sheet fluttered like a flag of surrender. Charles stepped inside.

The stink hit him like a club — sweat, urine, rot, and stale rum. Cockroaches skittered across the warped wooden floors, slipping between broken planks. A single oil lamp burned in the hallway, its flame dim and low. He moved down the corridor, listening. Doors shut tight, some with cloth instead of hinges, the sound of breathing behind them. Nothing more.

He took the stairs.

On the **second floor**, he turned left and paused. Yelling. Sharp, cruel.

"You piece of crap, you don’t pay up for the lost game I’ll slit your throat right here and now!"

The voice tore through the door like broken glass. Then a thud, a grunt — something heavy thrown. A crash of furniture. A body hitting the wall.

Charles crept closer, footsteps silent, ear to the wood.

A second voice whimpered something inaudible, then another roar:

“Damn you little roach, I will cut you!”

Slaps, punches. A chair cracked. Charles took a breath, stepped forward, and knocked hard.

"Open up!"

Silence.

Then a shuffle.

The door creaked, opened slowly. Arthur stood there, knife in one hand, the blade dull with something dark, a sailor’s striped shirt hanging off his shoulders, half-buttoned, soaked in sweat and drink. His face was red, his eyes glassy. Behind him, a young man lay unconscious, a pool of blood spreading under his head, face pale as wax.

Arthur stared at Charles, unblinking.

Then blinked again.

“Charles!” he slurred. “Hell, I thought you were the landlord.”

“We need to talk,” Charles said.

Arthur stepped aside, wiping his mouth. “Come in. Mind the furniture — most of it's broke.”

Charles sat on an upturned crate. Arthur tossed the knife on the floor with a dull clang and slumped into a chair that gave a small groan beneath him.

“I’ve got goods,” Charles said. “Need them delivered. Fast. Sold in China.”

Arthur scratched his chest. “Slow down, slow down. What’s this about?”

“There’s forty crates,” Charles said. “Dockside. Right now. Pure grade opium.”

Arthur blinked. Charles leaned forward.

“You move them. You sell them. You get forty percent of the profit.”

Arthur sat up straight, the booze clearing from his face by inches. “You serious?”

“Serious enough to knock out a guard for it,” Charles said.

Arthur looked at the floor, chewing the inside of his cheek, lips moving with the math.

“This is…” he muttered, counting under his breath. “Forty crates… eighty a crate… God’s damn teeth… this is three thousand two hundred pound sterlings, for me?”

Charles nodded once.

Arthur stood, swaying. “All right. Hell on earth, let’s do it. I’ll tell my crew tomorrow to load the stuff and we set sail.”

Charles stood up.

“No. We need to do it now. While it's still dark. By the morning, circumstances might be not so good.”

Arthur stared at him, bleary-eyed.

“Damn you,” he muttered. “All right. Let’s go.”

They made their way back down the stairs, stepping over the half-conscious man still bleeding beside the wall, and into the filthy street. The city had quieted further now, only the distant clang of chains and soft moans from alleyways broke the stillness.

At the docks, the tide lapped soft against hulls. They reached Arthur’s ship — a medium-sized cargo vessel, dark-hulled, sails furled, The Marlin's Jaw written faintly across her stern in chipping red paint.

Inside, the hold stank of sweat and cheap liquor. Five men lay sleeping under tarpaulin sheets, one snoring like a pig, another groaning in his sleep. Arthur stormed in, kicked one square in the ribs.

“Up! Get your rotten arses up!”

Another got a boot to the back of the head.

“I said up, dogs! We got cargo to move. Now!”

One sailor rolled over and mumbled something in French.

Arthur kicked over a barrel. “We’re loading opium, lads. Forty crates. You like coin? Then get up.”

The men staggered up, mumbling curses and rubbing their faces.

Charles pointed out to the dark heap near the dock wall.

“There. That stack.”

The crew looked at it, looked at him, then at Arthur.

Arthur roared, “Move! Or I’ll throw you overboard before dawn.”

The men moved.

Charles stood near the gangplank, pipe lit, watching as the first crates were lifted — grunted onto shoulders, rolled down the ramp, and stacked into the belly of the ship.

The night air was thick with smoke, brine, and something sharper

The loading took just under half an hour. The crew, driven by Arthur’s threats and the glimmer of silver in their futures, moved with the rough rhythm of men who’d done this work a hundred times before. The last crate landed with a thud in the hold, tucked beside a stack of rice sacks and a rotting rope coil that smelled of dead seawater.

Arthur wiped his brow with the back of his wrist and turned to Charles. “We need food,” he said. “And drink. Unless you fancy chewing leather straps by Java.”

Charles nodded and handed him a small purse. Arthur weighed it in his palm, smiled, and took off down the docks.

Charles waited on the deck, leaning against the mast, pipe lit. He watched as Arthur slipped into Naya Daur, still lit from within with the yellow glow of oil lamps. After twenty minutes, Arthur returned with two men hauling baskets and crates. He'd bought up every loaf of bread the tavern-keeper had, a bundle of coarse salt, two crates of salted river fish, and six bottles of whiskey, cradled like holy offerings in a burlap sack. The crew lifted the supplies aboard, stowing them beside the water barrels and the half-empty bag of lentils already rotting under the heat.

Macau Coast

By dawn, the Marlin’s Jaw slipped from Calcutta’s dock with sails half-raised and the breeze behind them. The city fell behind like a bad smell — a blur of smoke, brick, and slow-burning noise. The Ganges glittered, wide and thick with mud, the wind carrying the ship’s bones forward with a steady creak.

On the first day, the crew fell into pattern. Barefoot and tanned like old boots, they roamed the deck, mending ropes, arguing over the grind of salt against metal, and laughing over nothing. One of them, a wiry man with blackened teeth, hung a line over the rail and hauled up three fish before noon, tossing them onto the deck where they flopped until someone knifed them into stillness.

Arthur paced the helm, more focused now that the sea had taken them. His eyes moved from the sails to the horizon to the sky, lips always slightly parted as he judged the wind.

Charles leaned against a barrel near the helm. “You always sober at sea?”

Arthur shrugged. “Not always. Just when it matters. Stars don't care if you’re drunk. But you can't read 'em through a bottle.”

Below deck, three of the crew were already deep into the whiskey, passing it between them, laughing loud enough to rattle the floorboards. One sang a French sea shanty in a broken voice, tapping his foot against the wall.

By the second night, the air cooled and the ocean widened. No lights in sight. Just the long creak of timber and the flap of canvas overhead.

Charles shared a drink with Arthur. The opium crates lay silent below, packed like sleeping beasts. Arthur sat with a pipe in his mouth and a chart open on his lap, pointing with a stubby finger.

“We follow west by northwest,” he said. “Catch the trades. Two weeks to Singapore if the sea doesn’t turn on us.”

Charles drank slow, watching the sky. “You think we’ll make it?”

Arthur chuckled. “That depends on whether we meet pirates, typhoons, or our own damn luck.”

The crew below laughed again, someone dropped a bottle, a short argument broke out — a smack, a laugh, a curse — then silence.

The ship moved steady into the dark, and the wind carried them further from the muddy blood of Calcutta and into the deep unknown.

The voyage dragged on into its second week, the Bay of Bengal rolling beneath them in heaving sheets, sometimes calm as glass, sometimes raging like a beast. For three days straight the sky was a hard blue bowl, the sails puffed fat with wind, and the crew worked half-naked, their backs blistered from sun and salt. Fish came easy then, and they smoked what they couldn't eat, hanging the fillets in nets from the rigging like strange white flags.

But the sea turned without warning.

Late in the night, as they passed the Andaman Islands, the wind rose — a low growl that climbed into a roar. Clouds rolled over them like a bruised wall. Then came the first storm, lightning tearing the sky in crooked lines, waves rising high enough to slap the deck.

"Hold that damn line!" Arthur shouted, feet braced on the slanted deck, beard slick with rain.

The ship leaned hard, creaking like it meant to split in two. Charles tied himself to a rail, teeth chattering, soaked to the bone, eyes wide as water poured over the sides. Barrels rolled, crates shifted. Somewhere below deck, one man screamed when his head met a support beam.

The storm raged for half a day, then died just as fast.

For two days after, the wind disappeared, and they drifted with sails limp and flies thick around the salted fish. The sea steamed. Men swore and sat shirtless, drinking whatever was left of the whiskey. One leaned over the rail and puked bile into the water, muttering curses in Portuguese.

Then another storm hit — worse than the first. Three sails tore clean in the wind, and two men were nearly lost overboard if not for Arthur's grip and a well-thrown rope. Charles helped haul a water barrel back into place, every muscle screaming.

After the storm passed and the sea steadied, Charles found Arthur at the helm, soaked and bloodied, still steering by the stars with a torn sleeve and a pipe clenched in his jaw.

Charles leaned beside him, shaking salt from his coat.

"You know someone who'll buy this?" he asked. "I mean, really buy it. No guessing."

Arthur spat overboard and smiled.

"I wouldn't be sailing blind with forty crates of god's poison if I didn't," he said. "There's a port near Macau, quiet little bay, couple of trusted dogs anchor there. One of 'em trades for a man in Canton. Silver in chests, no questions, high prices. The kind who knows what he's buying."

Charles lit his pipe and stared at the dark line of clouds still dying on the horizon. "How solid?"

"Solid enough," Arthur said. "I sold five crates last spring, made enough to fill a man's mouth with gold teeth. This time, we bring forty? We're not just selling opium. We're buying our own names back."

Charles watched the sea a long time after that, smoke curling from his lips.

Below, the crew snored in hammocks, sore and soaked and drunk dry. The ship rocked steady again, cut through the sea like a blunt knife. Storms behind, money ahead.

If no flags were raised, and no shots fired from a Chinese patrol boat before they reached the shore.

The Marlin's Jaw slid into the quiet bay as the morning mist clung low to the water. Around them, the coast near Macau rose soft and green, small hills peppered with scrub trees and

pale rock. Two other ships sat at anchor — squat, heavy-sailed junks with flaking paint and banners limp in the air. The place had no customs house, no dockmaster shouting orders — just a stretch of worn planks, a crooked dock built from mismatched wood, and a narrow path leading into the clustered edge of a fishing village gone half to shadow.

Arthur leaned over the rail and sniffed the air. “Here we are,” he muttered. “If death has a quiet cousin, this is the bastard.”

Charles nodded and picked up a small sack. Inside it, he’d packed one ball of opium, wrapped in cloth and tied with twine. They climbed down into the dinghy and rowed ashore, the oars dipping into brown-green water, silent except for the creak of the locks and Arthur’s boots bumping the side.

The dock smelled of fish and wet rope. A few men squatted nearby, watching with half-lidded eyes. No one spoke.

They walked through a dirt alley and into a small wooden structure with open shutters and a faded red curtain pushed to one side. Inside, the smoke hung thick. Chinese men in long tunics and tied hair sat drinking quietly, some hunched over bowls of rice, others leaning back, lost in a haze of tobacco and something stronger.

Arthur nodded to a man behind the counter. No words were exchanged. He disappeared into a back room. Charles stood by the door, watching a boy roast something over a clay pot on the floor, the smell sharp and unfamiliar.

After a minute, Arthur returned — and with him came a man. Thin, straight-backed, with a long hanging mustache and eyes that looked as though they’d forgotten how to blink. He wore a blue robe with silver thread near the cuffs. His name was Liang Wu.

They sat at a round table near the back wall, lit by a crooked lantern that cast their shadows long.

Charles untied the sack, pulled out the opium ball, and set it on the table with care.

Liang Wu looked at it, unwrapped it slowly, then took out a small porcelain pipe, a coil of dark tubing, and packed the bowl tight with deft fingers. He lit it, leaned back, and exhaled a long plume.

He smiled, slow and satisfied.

“Very good,” he said in thick-accented English. “Bengal?”

Arthur nodded. “Patna. Fresh.”

Liang Wu nodded again, then sat quiet. “What is the price?”

Arthur leaned in, elbows on the table. “We’re not playing today. Two hundred sterling per crate. Forty crates.”

Liang Wu raised his brows, then chuckled softly. “Maybe… one hundred sixty.”

Arthur snorted. “For swamp-cut trash, maybe. You know this is not that. You’ve bought worse at two-twenty. I want two hundred. Take or leave.”

Charles stayed silent. Liang Wu looked at him, then back at Arthur. For a few heartbeats, no one spoke.

Then the Chinese man nodded once. “Good,” he said. “Two hundred. Forty. We pay now.”

He stood and disappeared into the back. Charles exhaled slowly, heart still sharp in his chest. Arthur grinned.

“Hell’s teeth, boy, you could have blinked and lost the deal.”

Charles grunted. “I trust your tongue.”

Moments later, five men emerged from the back room — silent, calm, all in loose tunics. One carried a heavy metal chest, the lid strapped tight. They set it on the table, opened it.

Stacks of silver sycees glinted under the lantern, some Spanish trade dollars, others marked with Qing seals.

Liang Wu returned and counted aloud, his fingers fast and precise. When he finished, he looked at Charles.

“Eight thousand sterling,” he said. “More than fair.”

Arthur grinned, leaned back, and lit a cigarette. “Fair enough to sleep a week without dreams.”

Liang Wu gave a short order to his men, and they left. Down by the dock, they began unloading the crates from the Marlin’s Jaw, Arthur’s crew joining in without complaint. Opium crates lined up along the building’s wall, then were lifted onto wooden mule carts, their wheels creaking under the weight.

Back inside, the lanterns burned lower. Liang Wu returned with a bottle of rice wine and three small cups. They drank — bitter and sweet — and then a small lacquered box was brought to the table.

Inside, a set of ivory dice and a painted board — the Chinese gambling game called “Bo Bing”.

They played.

Silver coins clinked, laughter broke out — restrained, but real. Arthur lost three rounds and laughed harder each time.

Charles watched the silver on the table, thinking only of the weight now sleeping in his bag.

The silver and notes were still warm from counting when Charles reached into his pocket and pulled out a bundle of Spanish trade dollars and several thick, folded banknotes pressed with Qing seals. He handed the agreed £3200 worth to Arthur, stacked neatly and tied with a red ribbon that looked like it had once belonged to a child's braid.

Arthur weighed it with both hands, grinned like a jackal, and tucked it into a canvas satchel he slung over his shoulder. He pulled out a few coins and called his crew over, tossing a handful to each man with a grin.

“For bruises and sails, boys. You drank hard and worked harder.”

The men whooped, raising their clay cups and toasting in half a dozen languages. The rice wine flowed without measure. They passed bottles under the open sky, leaning against walls and wooden posts, smoking twisted leaves and gambling with dice on a smooth plank. Liang Wu returned with more wine and watched the merriment with his hands folded behind his back, his expression unreadable but not unkind.

Night deepened, and the lanterns guttered in the warm breeze. Charles, a little drunk, turned to Liang Wu, who was seated cross-legged beside the game board.

“You trade anything besides smoke?” he asked.

Liang Wu nodded once. “Porcelain, silk bolts, ginger root, black lacquer boxes, dried mushroom, firecrackers — all things the Indian market hungers for. Cheap here. Profit there.”

Arthur grunted from behind his cup. “As long as it’s not eggs or goats, I’ll carry it.”

They agreed on ten crates of goods: four of silk, two of porcelain tea sets, two filled with preserved mushrooms in wax paper, one with carved trinkets and lacquer boxes, and one of pickled ginger root. Liang Wu had them stacked near the dock by morning, sealed in black-lacquered trunks with rope handles.

Charles shook his hand. “Thank you,” he said, his voice slow with wine. “We’ll make more business in the future.”

Liang Wu bowed slightly. “So long as there is ocean, there is trade.”

Arthur and Charles slept that night aboard the Marlin’s Jaw, swaying gently in their hammocks as the tide nudged the hull. The crew remained ashore for a week, drinking, gambling, and sinking into the quiet rhythm of this smugglers’ bay where law never reached. Some vanished into the hills with women, others slept on the dock under the open sky.

The days passed warm and clean. The wind stayed soft.

At week’s end, the crew returned, red-eyed and smiling. They boarded the ship again, and by the second morning, the Marlin’s Jaw caught the wind and left the coast behind. The voyage back to Calcutta stretched over three weeks, a slow curve across the South China Sea, then west through the Bay of Bengal. The ocean stayed calm. Rain fell on some days — short, warm showers that left puddles on deck. Others passed under sharp sun and perfect silence.

Arthur, pipe clenched in his teeth, spent the mornings watching the sky, then counted his money every evening like it might disappear if he didn’t keep it close.

He laughed aloud some nights, half to himself. “I’ll be drunk for a year in Pondicherry,” he muttered once. “No gods, no debts, just heat and salt and enough coin to keep from dying.”

Charles sat near the stern, watching the water roll past. His share — £4800 worth in silver and notes — lay folded in his inner coat pocket, wrapped in oilcloth and tied tight. He touched it sometimes, as if to make sure it hadn’t vanished, then leaned back and stared at the clean sky.

No sails on the horizon. No shouts of pursuit. Just wind, canvas, and the silent pulse of a sea that had — for now — given its blessing.

The muddy outlines of Calcutta Port emerged through the thick mist just after dawn. The towers of the Custom House pierced the haze, sails moved slow in the water, and already the docks rang with shouting coolies and the dull thump of cargo hitting wood. The Marlin's Jaw eased in under a soft wind, her hold heavier with cheap Chinese goods and her crew lighter with silver in their pockets.

Charles stood on the upper deck beside Arthur, arms resting on the rail. The city smelled like it always did—wet stone, open drains, fish, and fire.

"I'll make further business with you, Arthur," Charles said, watching a white-sailed ferry pass along the Hooghly's bend.

Arthur grinned, pipe clamped between his yellowed teeth. "If you bring me raining gold, I'll sure be happy to."

They shook hands. Arthur gave him a nod and turned to his crew, already half-packed and ready to vanish. Within minutes, they were gone—down alleys, into taverns, scattered to whatever corners the likes of them crawled to between voyages.

Fields of Red

Charles stepped alone onto the dock, the familiar feel of the city sinking into his boots.

Later that afternoon, he walked the twist of streets back to Kerpal's house behind Lalbazar, his bag heavy with coin, his coat damp from the late rains. He knocked once and entered.

Kerpal was seated cross-legged on a mat, rolling a leaf of tobacco.

"Charles!" he said, smiling. "You are alive."

Charles walked in, untied the pouch at his belt, and set a thick bundle of banknotes and coins on the mat beside him. Kerpal blinked and picked it up, feeling its weight.

"God's name... what is this?"

"One hundred pounds," Charles said. "For helping out. For not asking too many questions."

Kerpal stared, mouth slightly open. "This... this is enough to marry five daughters and buy a carriage."

"Then be generous. Or buy a better roof," Charles said. "Now I need your help."

Kerpal nodded slowly. "Yes. Anything."

“I want to buy land for poppy cultivation. Somewhere near Calcutta, or in Bengal or Bihar if the land is good. You’ll come with me. I don’t want to be cheated on the price or the paperwork.”

Kerpal stood. “That I can do. We go tomorrow. There is land near Patna, outside the city, good soil. Old planters used to grow for the Company there.”

The next day, after a hot ride by bullock cart and ferry over silt-thick rivers, they reached the outer edge of Patna District. The earth there stretched wide, brown and alive, patched with rows of chickpea, indigo, and fallow land, waiting. They found the land office, a tall red-stone building with an iron gate, where an old Bengali clerk in a white dhoti sat behind a desk fanning himself.

Kerpal spoke with the man, voices rising and lowering in rhythmic Bengali. The clerk nodded, scratched on parchment, and then led them out with a wide straw hat on his head, a clerk's ledger under one arm.

They walked a mile down a dusty track to a hill overlooking a broad valley of scattered trees and open plain. The land rolled gently, dark and damp from the rains, the kind that remembered river floods and grew well from it.

“This,” the clerk said in English, broken but clear, “is forty-five bigha. Can yield much. Government sells this for good price.”

Kerpal leaned over to Charles. “Enough for what you want. With good work, you can raise a hundred and fifty to two hundred crates in a year.”

Charles nodded, eyes scanning the horizon. This was the first real thing he owned. Not stolen, not smuggled, not hidden in a crate.

“How much?” he asked.

Kerpal and the clerk spoke again. After a pause, Kerpal turned.

“He asks for seventy pounds. Paper signed in Calcutta. We come tomorrow with your name and thumb. It is official.”

Charles reached into his coat, drew out the wrapped oilcloth from his inner pocket, and slowly untied it.

“I’ll pay now,” he said.

The ink dried slow under the Calcutta heat. Charles pressed his thumb beside his name in the land registry, the grain of the parchment warm beneath his hand. The clerk folded the papers, stamped them twice with red wax and a brass seal, then handed them back with a

stiff nod. Kerpal took them with both hands, smiling politely, and tucked them into a leather pouch.

“Now it is yours,” he said to Charles as they stepped out into the dusty street. “In this land you are malik. Owner.”

Two days later they returned to the district land office near Patna with the signed deeds. The same clerk greeted them with more courtesy than before, recognizing the official stamps. He reviewed the documents, made a few dry notes in the ledger, and nodded.

“All in order,” he said. “You may begin work.”

Outside, the valley waited.

That same evening, Charles sat on the wooden bench inside Naya Daur Tavern, the lantern hissing above him, watching the door while the rice wine turned stale in his mouth. Kerpal had vanished for four days. Charles didn’t ask questions. He simply waited, counting his remaining money and watching the silver coins in his pouch grow thin with use.

On the fifth morning, the tavern door creaked open.

Kerpal entered with dust on his boots and a sweat-stained shirt. His smile was bright.

“Carts are waiting,” he said. “With seed. Good seed.”

They stepped outside. Three wooden carts with canvas covers stood in the road, pulled by oxen, each piled high with burlap sacks of poppy seed, tied and sealed.

They left at once for the estate.

By the time they reached the land, the sun had begun to rise behind the hills, gold bleeding across the soil. At the foot of the slope, a new group of men were unloading wooden beams and fresh-cut planks from two more carts. The sharp smell of fresh timber filled the air.

Kerpal pointed. “These are the builders. They will sleep in tents. They know what to do.”

Charles stepped forward and marked the ground with the heel of his boot. “Warehouse here. Facing east. Enough space to store a year’s work.”

The men nodded and began at once, clearing brush, hammering supports into the soil with iron mallets. For two weeks, the clatter of work never stopped. By day the frame rose, beams fitted tight, the walls sealed with pitch and rope. At night, fires burned and the sound of quiet laughter echoed under the hills.

Charles oversaw it all, watching from a shaded rock with his pipe and ledger. By the end of the second week, the warehouse stood complete — a squat, thick-walled structure of hard timber, raised on stone slabs, the roof made of layered palm and thatch.

The poppy seed was carried inside, the sacks stacked to the beams.

The next morning, four men arrived — silent, lean, and armed with curved blades tucked under their tunics.

Kerpal introduced them. “These are guards. Paid for three months. They will sleep near the warehouse and watch it at night.”

Charles shook their hands one by one, noting the scars on their knuckles and the calm way they watched him without speaking.

Later that day, a dozen villagers arrived from a nearby hamlet, barefoot, some carrying tools, others with nothing but tired eyes.

Kerpal gathered them under a tree and spoke quickly in Bengali, gesturing to the field, then to Charles, then to the warehouse.

“They understand,” he said. “They will till, sow, water. You must feed them. At harvest, we bring men from the city to refine and pack. These are growers, not smugglers.”

Charles looked over the faces — weathered, brown-skinned, slow-moving but strong. He nodded once.

“Start tomorrow,” he said. “And tell them this: they work fair, they get paid fair.”

Kerpal translated.

Some of the farmers smiled.

The next week, the soil was broken. The first rows of poppy were sown.

The months turned over like pages in dust, each one marked by the rhythm of planting, watering, watching. The fields around Charles’s land rolled in gentle curves of green — not rice or millet like the other estates, but orderly rows of young poppy, their stems thickening under the Bengal sun.

As the flowers slowly began to bloom, Charles rode once more to the district land office, the same red-stone building where his name was already scrawled in the official ledgers. This time, he carried new papers, and Kerpal at his side, nodding to the clerk with practiced ease.

Charles stood by the desk, tapping a rolled parchment.

“I want to build a house. Not much. Just walls, roof, a room for myself. A place for the guards to sleep.”

The clerk looked over the paper, marked it with a thick black quill, and stamped it once.

“You may proceed,” he said. “No tax on residence if used for land oversight.”

Outside, Charles handed the paper to Kerpal.

“Get it moving,” he said. “I don’t want another six weeks of waiting.”

Kerpal nodded. “It will move. I know a man in Rajapur. He builds for cheap. Good walls.”

The crew arrived three days later — skinny men with red cloths around their foreheads, carrying baskets of tools and thin saws, bare feet coated in dry mud. They worked fast, day and night. The frame rose first, rough teak and bamboo, then the walls sealed with clay and husk, the roof layered with woven straw. There was nothing elegant in it — a squat house with one central room, two narrow ones at the sides, a porch to sit on and a stone fire pit nearby.

Four months passed before it was done.

Charles came to inspect it with a jug of water slung over his shoulder, riding in on a bullock cart from town.

Inside, the floor was packed dirt, cool underfoot, and the windows were open squares, no glass. In one room, a thin rope bed stretched wall to wall — his. In the other, rolled mats for the guards. A small wooden shelf and a folding desk sat in the corner. On the wall hung a rusted lantern. It was enough.

“Looks like it’ll hold through a storm,” Charles said, walking in a slow circle.

Kerpal grinned. “More than we can say for the taverns in town.”

Charles chuckled. “Speaking of.”

He returned to Calcutta by ferry, dry bags in hand. The Naya Daur had served him well, but the nights there had turned rougher, the crowds meaner. He had around four thousand pounds left, enough to live clean and quiet if he chose to, or to start something bigger.

He spent two days walking the streets — past Bowbazar, down Chowringhee, all the way to the shaded corners of Mission Row, inspecting every tavern, lodging house, and backroom that rented by the week.

In a cleaner house with a brick façade and iron-latched doors, he met a pale Armenian keeper with a mild voice and good tobacco.

“You rent?” Charles asked.

The man looked him over. “Twelve annas a night. Clean mat, water, mosquito curtain. Quiet after dark.”

Charles nodded. “I’ll pay for the month.”

The man opened the door to a small upstairs room. A cot, a jug stand, a candle holder, nothing more.

But no rats. No shouting. No stink.

Charles stepped inside and sat on the cot, the bag of silver still heavy at his side.

Four thousand pounds. And the fields blooming. He lit a pipe, blew out a slow curl of smoke, and stared out the open window at the city moving below.

The next morning, with the sun already warming the dust on Chowringhee Road, Charles wrapped his money pouch in a cotton cloth, tucked it deep inside his coat, and made his way to the Bank of Hindostan. The building stood tall and squared, its columns stained with soot, and a guard in faded blue livery stood at the entrance, chewing betel and blinking in the light.

Inside, the air was cooler. Men sat at tall desks with ledgers open like maps, quills scratching in ink. A clock ticked from the far wall. Charles waited his turn at the polished counter while a clerk sorted a stack of copper coins.

When he stepped forward, he placed the wrapped pouch on the counter. “I’d like to open an account,” he said. “In sterling.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Your name?”

“Charles Harker.”

The pouch unwrapped with a soft clink. The clerk’s hands hesitated when the weight of silver and folded notes spilled gently onto the table. He nodded, took a form, and began filling it in.

After an hour of formalities, a wax seal, and a signature, Charles stepped out with a thin book in his coat pocket and a sense of lightness that was new.

“Finally,” he muttered, stepping into the street, “I can sleep without my coat under my pillow.”

That evening, he rode out to the land again, the path familiar now, the rows of poppy high and heavy with white flowers, their green heads bulging with sap. He met Kerpal under the wide tree beside the warehouse. The two sat on the ground, watching the workers bend between rows.

“The price of opium,” Charles said, breaking a roll of flatbread, “you think it will stay high?”

Kerpal nodded, chewing slowly. “In Canton, yes. More mouths for the smoke. Too many men forget their days now. But the Company still taxes it here.”

“I need someone to oversee the whole field,” Charles said. “Not just come and go. I can’t be here every day. You’ve been honest. I’ll give you three percent of all trade profit if you visit three times a week, keep the farmers working, and handle anything that needs attention.”

Kerpal’s eyes widened. “Three percent... for doing what I already do?”

“No. For doing it properly,” Charles said. “If something breaks, you fix it. If someone steals, you deal with them. And when the crop’s ready, you help refine it.”

Kerpal nodded slowly. “It is a good offer. I’ll take it.”

“Good,” Charles said. “Now — for the processing. We’ll need earthen pans, large brass trays, iron ladles, wooden molds for forming the cakes. You know who can make those?”

“Yes,” Kerpal said. “I will bring potmen from Gaya. Brass can come from the city.”

They spent the next two weeks organizing.

A caravan of carts arrived one morning, loaded with earthen pots, flat-bottomed clay pans, and bundles of dry grass for fuel. Inside the warehouse, a long table was built, and hooks set in the ceiling to hang bags and tools. Workers sealed a corner of the warehouse with mud and lime for opium storage, cool and dark.

Months passed.

The rains came and went, and the poppies turned from bright white to dull yellow. The pods swelled, fat with juice, their stems turning crisp. Each head would soon be scored by hand, the sap collected at dawn.

Charles stood one morning at the edge of the field, hands on his hips, watching the wind ripple across the rows.

Kerpal walked up beside him. “Soon now,” he said.

Charles nodded. “Tell the men — don’t bruise the pods. Shallow cuts. If we lose even a third to rot, we’ll regret it.”

Kerpal smiled faintly. “They know. These are not their first flowers.”

Charles looked over the land, the warehouse in the distance, the guards now lounging in its shade, and the thin smoke from the cooking fire curling into the sky.

“Then we’ll make ready for harvest,” he said. “And soon enough — for a trip to Canton.”

The days grew dry and sharp. Dust clung to the poppy leaves, and the flowers that once rippled white across the fields had withered, leaving behind fat, heavy seedpods, pale green, striped, some turning brown at the seams. The farmers now worked from first light to dusk, crouching in long lines under the open sky, their curved knives held like surgical tools.

The harvest began with the lancing.

Each poppy pod was scored with three to four shallow cuts, running from top to bottom, careful not to pierce the inner wall. The sap — thick, white, and sticky — bled out slowly, gathering in beads across the cuts. These were left overnight. At dawn, the farmers returned with small iron scrapers, collecting the dried sap into earthen pots. It hardened quickly in the sun, darkening to a thick brown resin. This was raw opium.

Every morning for weeks, the workers repeated the process, moving row by row, hands blackened with the bitter resin, sweat streaking their foreheads. Women and boys carried the filled pots to the warehouse, where Kerpal kept track of the weight with a rough scale.

Inside, the warehouse air was thick — spiced with the sweet, earthy rot of opium.

Here, the processing began.

The raw resin was dumped into wide-mouthed earthen pans, then gently warmed over coal braziers until it softened to a taffy-like consistency. Workers stirred it constantly with long iron ladles, ensuring it didn't burn. Once soft, it was transferred to shallow brass trays and left to cool, the moisture slowly evaporating over hours. Kerpal moved between them, pointing out bubbles, checking thickness, shouting for more heat or less.

When the paste reached the right consistency — pliable but firm — it was rolled into balls by hand, about the size of a clenched fist, then pressed into wooden molds lined with dried leaves. These formed bricks, flat and dense, each weighing around two pounds.

Charles oversaw it all, standing with arms folded in the shade of the warehouse doorway, wearing a loose linen shirt, a broad hat on his head.

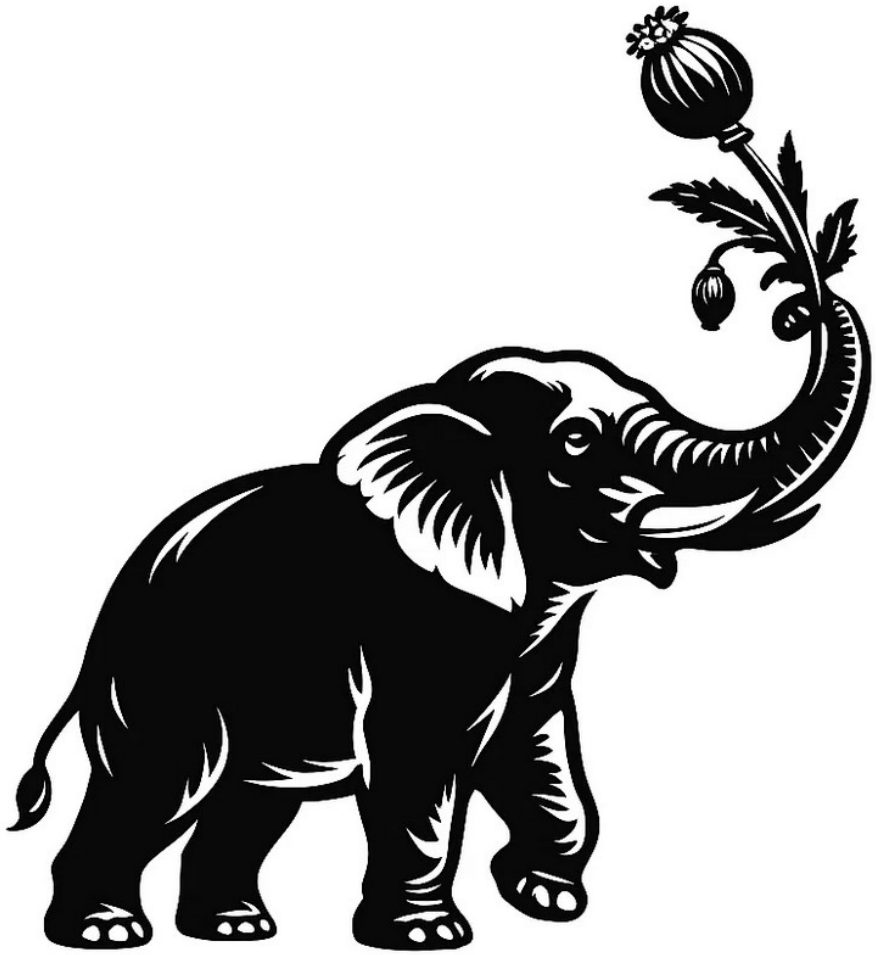
Kerpal entered the warehouse, brushing dust from his sleeves. "The crates are coming now. First cart's outside."

Outside, two bullock carts arrived, piled high with fresh, empty wooden crates made in Calcutta to order. The carpenters had nailed them tight and smooth, each big enough to hold ten bricks. More carts were expected by the evening.

"Good," Charles said. "Let's not stack anything until the paste is cooled and shaped proper. I don't want any of that sweating and leaking by the time we load."

Kerpal nodded. "The dry ones will be ready by tomorrow. You want markings on the crates?"

"Yes. I already sent word to the city. A man's making me a cast-iron stamp. Elephant with a poppy."



Kerpal grinned.

Outside, the sun leaned west, and the air inside the warehouse hummed with low voices, the scrape of iron, and the slow bubbling of heat. The first crates sat in rows by the far wall, empty for now, waiting for the resin to become gold.

The light was already bleeding from the alley when Charles found Arthur sitting cross-legged on the floor of a shadowed backroom in a house behind Mission Row, shirt half-open, face glossy with sweat, a bottle of gin at his side and a deck of sticky cards in front of him. Two half-naked men sat across the table, one of them snoring, the other grinning through a chipped tooth.

“Arthur,” Charles said from the door, arms folded. “Get your boots on.”

Arthur blinked, wiped his mouth, and grinned. “Well damn. I thought I saw a ghost.”

Charles stepped in, brushing past the stink of smoke and sour food. “You’ve got work. We’re heading out again. Liang Wu or Cantao, whichever's open. You in?”

Arthur stood, wincing as he stepped on a broken pipe. “You’re talking to a man who’s got less money than his boots got leather. I pissed away every coin on drink, cards, and women with no patience. So yes — I’m in. Fully.”

“Good,” Charles said. “Be at the docks in four days. We’re loading heavy.”

Back at the plantation, the work never slowed.

Inside the warehouse, the bricks of processed opium had hardened into dark, sticky blocks, dense and sharp-edged. Workers moved in a practiced rhythm: four men per table, one shaping, two wrapping the bricks in dry leaves, the last lowering them into thick wooden crates, lined with straw. Each crate was marked before sealing.

Kerpal stood over a heated iron plate at the corner of the warehouse, raising it with iron tongs and stamping the lid of each closed crate. The iron plate hissed as it hit the wood, branding it deep.

An elephant, trunk raised, holding a poppy blossom.

“What does it mean?” one of the farmers asked Kerpal, watching the image glow.

“Means you don’t ask questions,” Kerpal muttered. “And that this box is going far.”

That night, the first carts rolled out — drawn by bullocks, guarded by men with long sticks and belts of iron, each crate strapped down tight. The route to Calcutta took two days, stopping only once by a river where the guards boiled rice over a fire and checked the lashings.

By the third morning, they arrived at the docks.

Arthur stood by the gangway of his ship, hair tied back, chewing something he didn’t bother to name. His jacket was clean — newer than last voyage — and his men were sober for once, mostly.

Charles stepped from the lead cart.

“All here?” Arthur asked.

“One hundred and forty crates,” Charles said. “Another thirty still drying in the warehouse. We’ll bring them next time.”

Arthur looked at the elephant-stamped boxes and let out a low whistle. “That’s a good-looking army of poison. They’ll eat it up in Canton.”

Charles nodded. “I’m coming with you this time. Want to make sure Liang Wu’s still paying well.”

Arthur clapped him on the back. “Then climb aboard. We sail tonight.”

As the crates were loaded with the careful rhythm of practiced hands, the dock creaked under their weight. The ship groaned, and the tide lifted slow. Above, the gulls circled in the growing dusk, and below, Charles lit his pipe, watching the first of his stamped crates vanish into the ship’s hold.

Another voyage.

Another harvest sold to ghosts.

The sea turned a soft green as the Marlin’s Jaw cut across the water, wind thick in her sails, gulls crying in the pale morning sky. For three weeks, the voyage from Calcutta to the coast near Macau had passed in lazy rhythm — calm waters, salted fish, men playing cards on the deck, Arthur shouting at drunk crewmen, Charles pacing the length of the upper rail with a pipe in his mouth and numbers running circles in his head.

When they dropped anchor in the quiet crescent bay, a low mist clung to the coast, and the scent of cooked pork drifted from the inland streets.

Arthur squinted toward the port buildings.

“Wu’s still here, I’ll wager,” he muttered. “Unless he smoked himself to death.”

They left the ship, stepping into the mud-wet docks. A boy led them through a winding alley to the same narrow house as before — red lanterns hanging from the doorway, faint music behind the shutters. Inside, Liang Wu sat cross-legged in a high-backed chair, robes of light blue silk falling over his knees, a long pipe resting in a copper tray beside him.

He looked up as they entered. “Gentlemen,” he said in clear English, “the wind brings fortune again.”

Arthur chuckled. “More like stinking crates and men who can’t count. We brought the goods. Hundred and forty.”

Liang Wu stood, waved a hand. His servants filtered through the side door and began organizing the crates one by one, breaking the seals, inspecting the goods. Charles stood beside one, lifting a brick from inside and cracking it open with his knife.

“Not perfect,” he said to Wu. “First full harvest. Quality’s a bit dark, some paste not fully cooked.”

Liang Wu sniffed the brick, rubbed it between his fingers, and smiled faintly.

“Still smokeable,” he said. “Not the best... but you’re not the worst.”

He offered them 150 pounds sterling per chest.

Charles met Arthur’s glance, and they nodded.

“Done.”

The crates vanished quickly, loaded onto mule carts under cover of night. The next morning, Wu’s accountant brought a lacquered box, heavy with Spanish silver dollars and banknotes bearing Qing seals, equal to 21,000 pounds sterling.

Back on the Marlin’s Jaw, as the ship rocked gently and the sails began to fill again, Charles handed Arthur 3,000.

“You keep blowing it all,” he said, “but you still get paid.”

Arthur grinned, clapping the silver box with one hand. “I’m reliable when I’m drunk, just not cheap.”

The return voyage was as peaceful as the last — waves soft, storms light. Charles sat on deck counting out banknotes, his mind already drifting back to Calcutta.

Upon docking, he wasted no time. He took his ledgers and walked straight to the Bank of Hindostan, cleaner shaven than usual, boots oiled, coat pressed. Inside, he approached the same clerk from his first deposit.

“I have another amount to lodge,” he said. “Business from China. Agricultural trade, land revenue.”

The clerk blinked at the size of the box as it opened. “This is... considerable.”

“Leave me 500 for personal use,” Charles said. “Rest goes to the account.”

He left with his passbook reflecting a new balance of £21,500, his name now inked into the deeper ledgers, the kind that earned nods and unlocked backroom meetings.

That evening, he set out to find a proper house.

After two days of quiet scouting, Charles signed a lease on a two-story brick house near the Maidan, with wide verandas, a garden with banyan trees, and three local servants — a cook, a washer, and a man to mind the door. There was quiet, oil lamps in the halls, and mosquito nets over the beds.

From the shaded porch, he smoked and watched crows flutter through the garden.

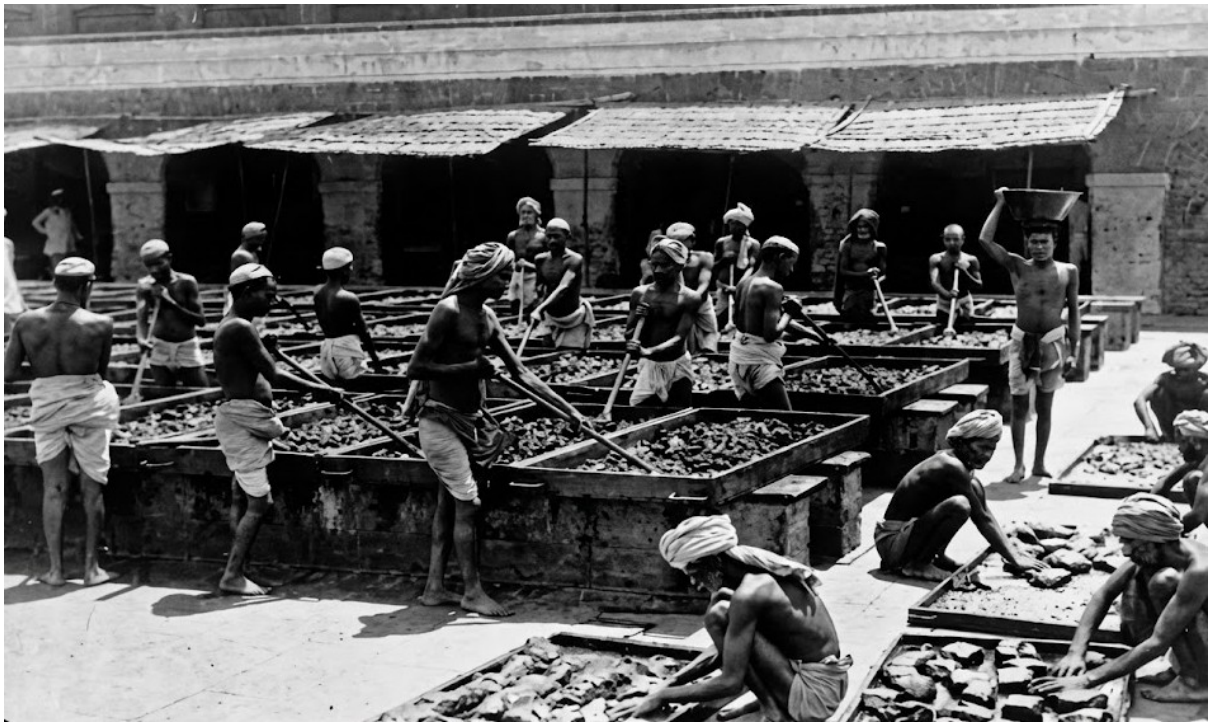
A week later, on a muggy Saturday morning, Kerpal arrived in a cart, waving a folded fan and urging Charles to come with him.

“Where?” Charles asked.

“To the opium market.”

They rode through the dust-choked roads until they reached a crowded open-air space, just off Bowbazar, where the British East India Company had set up a buying station. Large wooden stalls lined the square, each one with crates opened, bricks laid out, measured, sniffed, tapped.

Company officials walked between the stalls, tasting samples, nodding, scribbling in their books. Prices rang out in rupees and annas.



Charles leaned close to one buyer, listening.

“Eight hundred rupees a chest,” Kerpal whispered. “Your price, just now, was over a thousand. You’re undercutting them, even with lower quality.”

Charles nodded slowly, watching how the Company men haggled hard with farmers, then bought low. The price advantage, however, came with brutal inspections and a rigid process.

As they moved through the crowd, Kerpal stopped by a man with stained fingers and a quiet voice. They spoke in Bengali for some minutes before the man gestured to two others nearby.

“They process for a Patna trader,” Kerpal explained. “Ten years experience. Their bricks are used for export. They’re not rich, but they’re precise. Want better product? Hire them.”

Charles nodded. “You tell them — if they come work my warehouse and improve the paste, they get fair pay and bonuses after every harvest.”

Kerpal spoke again. The men nodded.

“They’ll come. By next moon.”

Charles stepped back, looking once more over the market — the crates, the Company seal, the noise. Then he lit his pipe.

“We’ll sell better than them next year,” he said. “Cleaner. Cheaper.”

The evening hung thick and unmoving. From the veranda, the garden below shimmered in the heat of the day just gone, the banyan trees still, not a bird in sight. Charles sat cross-legged on a wooden chair, his shirt open, the collar dark with sweat. On the low table beside him rested a brass pipe, a lacquered tray, and a small brick of his own opium — cut from the a crate that hadn’t made it onto Arthur’s ship.

He sliced a corner from the brick with his knife, thumbed the dark resin, and scraped it gently into the pipe bowl. The smell was sharp, earthy, faintly sour.

He lit a match, touched it to the bowl, and pulled in slow.

The smoke curled like threads of ink.

He leaned back.

Warmth folded over him, not as sharp as liquor, not as violent — but steady, like falling into velvet. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, blinking through the haze.

"Not bad," he murmured.

Another pull. Then another. The sting had gone from the smoke. It moved easily through his chest now, slow and narcotic. The bitterness gave way to sweetness, to calm.

His thoughts drifted.

"The cut’s right... we got the juice in time," he muttered. “Still… not enough bake in the paste. The last batch cooked soft, didn't lose the water fully. Kerpal said the brass pans weren’t hot enough. Maybe better coal. Maybe iron stoves...”

He shifted in the chair, breathing slowly.

“Planted in October… pods came thick by late Jan… scored ‘em first week of March,” he whispered, voice flat now. “Sap dried good... mostly. But next year... sharper knives, tighter rows. Maybe plant in stagger, start half in late October, half early November. Spread the work…”

He let his head fall back, eyes fixed on the ceiling. The opium blurred the air, and his mind floated along the scent of the resin.

“Four weeks for process,” he muttered. “No rush. Heat slow. That’s what Kerpal said — too fast, and the paste gets bitter.”

A servant knocked softly and brought in a tray — a tin plate with rice, lentils, and fried fish. Charles stirred but didn’t rise. After a long pause, he stood, walked to the basin, and pulled off his shirt.

In the bedroom, a metal tub sat waiting, half-filled, steam still rising. He stepped in, the water clutching his legs, then sinking in fully. The heat soaked into his skin, into the corners of his shoulders.

He lay back and closed his eyes.

The pipe’s taste still lingered in his mouth.

He saw the fields blooming again in red, the curved knives flashing in morning sun, workers bent in rows.

Next year.

Better fires. Better blades. Better hands.

He dried himself with a coarse cloth, pulled on loose nightwear, and climbed into the wide bed beneath the mosquito net. The room swam gently as he lay still, the ceiling fanning out in soft waves above him.

He did not even notice when sleep arrived.

The hot months pressed down over Bengal, the sky pale and breathless, dust clinging to leaves like ash. Charles stood by the warehouse, staring at the last of his harvest — thirty crates, one more left for other use, packed and stacked, each one stamped with the familiar brand: the elephant holding a poppy.

Inside, Kerpal wiped sweat from his neck and looked up at Charles. “Still more to sell.”

“Not me this time,” Charles said, arms folded. “Arthur’s got this one.”

He found Arthur in a gin shack near the race grounds, half asleep with a glass in hand. The sailor sat up when Charles entered, blinking like a bear woken from winter.

“You’ve sailed twice,” Charles said. “Time to do one without me.”

Arthur scratched at his neck. “How many crates?”

“Thirty. Standard rate. You bring back forty-five hundred sterling, I give you a thousand. Keep the rest clean.”

Arthur grinned, already awake now. “You think I’m your courier boy?”

“No,” Charles said. “You’re a paid one.”

The next day, Kerpal oversaw the loading. Workers grunted as they moved the crates from the warehouse to the carts, the oxen sweating under the sun. At the docks, they stacked the boxes into the hold of the Marlin’s Jaw, lashed them in, and secured the deck.

“Watch your crew,” Kerpal said to Arthur as they shook hands. “They get greedy, they’ll toss you first.”

Arthur just smiled. “They’ll be too drunk to mutiny.”

He sailed at sunset.

Six weeks later, the ship returned on a clear evening, its sails burnt with sun and ropes stiff from salt. Arthur rode inland that night, arriving at the plantation smelling of sea, clove smoke, and last night’s drink. He stepped off his cart, teeth white with laughter.

“Four thousand five hundred,” he said, handing over a heavy pouch. “Count it.”

Charles took it without a word, opened it briefly to scan the notes and silver. He handed back another sack.

“Thousand. As promised.”

Arthur grinned. “Still the best captain you ever paid.”

“Still the only one,” Charles replied.

Arthur left the next morning.

The land lay fallow now. April had bled into May. The fields were empty, the poppies long gone, the soil sun-dried and hard. Farmers worked quietly, turning earth, fixing irrigation trenches, scraping stones into piles. There would be no planting till October. For Charles, it meant one thing: time.

Arthur, restless without sea or smoke, came knocking a week later.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, slouched in a chair on Charles’s porch, pipe in hand. “Why not open a place? A den. Somewhere folk can lie back, smoke up, buy cheap and steady. Good for business, good for your brand.”

Charles didn’t blink. “Where?”

“City. Not the fancy quarter. Closer to the market road, maybe behind Boubazar. I know a man who’ll rent a shop front and two rooms for less than thirty rupees.”

Charles leaned forward. “You furnish it yourself?”

Arthur smirked. “Already have Kerpal running it down. We’ll put in bamboo mattresses, low tables, some soft woven mats, an old charpoy or two. Maybe even get a lad with a flute or drum to keep the air pleasant. Addicts like noise. Keeps ghosts away.”

Charles lit his pipe and nodded once. “Fine. But the opium’s mine.”

Arthur shrugged. “Naturally. Branding’s all yours.”

The first den opened by the end of June.

It was a narrow building with papered windows and a faded curtain over the door. Inside, the air was thick with smoke and sandalwood, a narrow hallway leading to a dim chamber lined with mats and floor cushions. Small oil lamps flickered on iron hooks, and from the far corner a soft hum of a bowed string instrument played by an old man soothed the haze.

A servant moved from mat to mat with a small brass burner, offering flame to those already laid back, pipes in hand, mouths slack. Most of the patrons were coolies, rickshaw men, and tradesmen, with a few clerk types from the city peeking in after dusk. The charge was modest — two annas for the seat, pipe extra. Arthur supplied bricks directly from Charles’s harvest, making sure the quality, though not the best, was good enough to draw repeat smokers.

“Make it cheap,” he told Kerpal. “We’re not robbing them. We’re training them.”

By July, a second den had opened closer to the docks.

“Soon they’ll be asking for the elephant mark by name,” Arthur said, sitting in the first den one night, watching the room blur with smoke. “Your name’s moving faster than your ships.”

Charles only smiled.

There was no rush. The season would turn soon enough, and when the red fields bloomed again, they'd be ready.

By the end of the rains, the city air thickened with dust once more, and the days stretched long with heat. Word of Charles’s opium had begun to settle in the streets like the smoke it produced. The two dens, tucked in alleys off Bowbazar and near the port, were never empty now. The mats filled from midday, and the air inside never cleared. Men came from half the city — dock workers, petty officials, merchants, even stray sahibs in silk waistcoats with trembling fingers.

It was now October, 1801.

The scent of the monsoon still clung faintly to the earth, but already the sun burned high, drying the soil. In the fields, farmers moved like ants, hunched and silent, fingers sowing seeds into furrows cut deep and even. Charles visited three times a week, sometimes staying over in the land house, rising early to walk the ridges between fields.

He didn't need to shout or command anymore. Kerpal handled the plantation now.

The man had grown into the role with speed and steel, standing each morning before the workers, barking orders with a bamboo stick in hand and a leather pouch tied to his belt. He checked the irrigation lines, counted the seed bags, and demanded silence during lancing instruction. His voice carried from one end of the plantation to the other.

"More spacing in the northern rows!"
"No shallow cuts this time! Slice once, let it bleed!"
"If it dries too fast, the buyers will laugh at our brick!"

From November to February, the poppies grew fast and green, their heads rising above the grass line, soft and nodding in the breeze. By late January, the red blooms unfurled like blood in water, and by February's second week, the flowers had dropped, leaving behind the round, swollen pods — full of promise and danger.

Then came March.

Lancing began at dawn, with short-handled blades, fine and curved, designed to cut but not kill. The workers moved in silence through the fields, scoring pod after pod with gentle hands. The white sap beaded along the cuts, left overnight to darken and harden. Each morning, the men returned to scrape the tar-like resin, collecting it into leather satchels slung over their shoulders.

Timing was everything.

Too early, and the sap would be bitter and weak. Too late, and the pod would dry, sealing in what might have been gold.

By mid-April, the collection was done. Fires were lit in the warehouse. Inside, the sap was kneaded by hand, pressed and shaped, boiled gently over low charcoal fires, slowly reduced to a thick, pliable paste. Skilled hands thickened it, tested the texture, rolled it, then pressed it into the same molds as the year before.

The bricks were perfect now. Heavy, dark, smooth. Fragrant when warmed.

The elephant-and-poppy brand burned deep into the wood of each crate. Charles watched with satisfaction as the seal hissed once again, this time onto new timber, strong and uniform.

Kerpal arranged the carts, and by early May, one hundred seventy crates stood ready.

At the docks, Arthur waited. He was soberer than usual, with a freshly tied scarf and boots that matched. He barked at his men to be careful with the crates, cursing in three tongues as they hoisted them aboard.

“You’re putting on the finest opium in the East,” he shouted. “You drop one and I’ll toss you to the sharks.”

Charles handed him the papers, folded clean. “Price is two hundred per crate. You return with thirty-four thousand, I give you three. Don’t be clever.”

Arthur grinned. “When am I ever?”

He sailed with the tide.

The voyage was fast, carried by steady wind and a quiet sea. Three weeks out, the Marlin’s Jaw docked once more in the bay near Canton, and the crates were delivered into Liang Wu’s silent warehouse, lit with red lanterns and hung with silk banners.

The new price didn’t shock Liang.

He opened a crate, tested the brick, ran it under his nose, bit the edge, lit a pipe. His eyes closed. He nodded.

“It’s time you charged more,” he said. “This... is very good.”

The deal was struck at 200 sterling per crate. Thirty-four thousand sterling, counted in clean Spanish dollars and thick folded notes.

Arthur returned with the wind behind him, arriving by early July. He rode out to the plantation that same evening, dust clinging to his coat, eyes red with sleep and triumph.

He found Charles sitting under the veranda roof, sipping a cooled drink.

Arthur tossed the pouch onto the table. “Full count. Not a penny short.”

Charles weighed it in hand, then tossed him another bag — three thousand, wrapped tight.

Arthur opened it, smiled. “I’ll lose it all by August.”

“Just make sure the ship stays afloat,” Charles said.

That night, the fields were empty but the coffers were full. The land rested, the workers slept, and smoke from the dens rose once more over the city, slow and sweet.

Charles stepped out from the bank’s marble portico, the dust of midday blowing faint along the road. The pouch was lighter now — thirty-four thousand sterling reduced to a slip of

paper, bearing the seal of the Bank of Hindostan. He folded the cheque receipt neatly and tucked it into his coat. A few passersby gave him long glances. His boots were polished, his linen crisp, and his hat trimmed in fine Calcutta ribbon. He walked like a man not rushing anywhere, and yet owning the ground he stepped on.

From there he went straight to the land office, pushing open the heavy door as the clerks looked up. Kerpal was already waiting by the front desk, arms folded and a roll of maps under one arm.

The manager, a thin man with spectacles far too large for his face, unrolled a map of plots east of the current plantation. “What are you looking to add, sahib?”

“Eighty more acres,” Charles said. “Next to the south fields. All fertile.”

The manager adjusted his glasses. “That would be—let me calculate—” he pulled a ledger from the shelf. “At current rate... 1,000 rupees an acre. That’s 80,000 rupees.”

Charles wrote the cheque without flinching. “Add it to my file. Documents ready by end of week.”

“They will be, sir,” the clerk nodded, eyes wide.

That evening, Charles stepped into the den near the port, a small wrapped parcel in his hand. He found Arthur reclining on a mat, eyes half-closed, and Kerpal in a far corner, sipping from a clay cup.

Charles handed the parcel to the den servant and said, “Open it. Pipe it.”

The servant obeyed. A soft flame lit the new brick — cut from the most recent harvest, the best yet — and soon, white smoke drifted low across the room. One man inhaled, coughed, then lay back, eyes flickering. Another took a long draw and gave a low murmur, smiling to himself.

Within two hours, the den was packed.

By the following week, the addicts no longer asked for just opium. Now they asked for “Elephant.”

Charles lived now in the grand manner. The two-story house on Circular Road had gardens, tall gates, two maids, a cook, and a manservant named Sitaram who ironed his linen and sharpened his razors. Breakfasts were fish and eggs in butter, lunches came with imported red wine, and dinners stretched long into evening, candlelit and calm, always ending with a pipe or two on the veranda.

Then, one afternoon, Kerpal arrived on horseback, face drawn, dust still clinging to his turban.

Charles met him on the steps.

“It’s the warehouse,” Kerpal said, voice low. “Fire. Last night.”

Charles stiffened. “How much?”

“Not much lost. We put it out fast. One side is scorched. Mostly walls, not bricks. But...” He hesitated. “It wasn’t an accident. Guards say it was set. Someone came in with burning cloth and oil.”

“Thieves?”

Kerpal shook his head. “No. One guard saw the man running, ran after him and was seriously wounded. Said he was dressed like a worker, but knew his way too well. We think... maybe someone from the other plantations. The ones who sell to the Company. I think they don’t like the Elephant.”

Charles turned away, silent for a moment, then faced him again.

“Hire more men,” he said. “Rifles this time. You get what you need. And here—” He went into his study and returned with a pouch, placing it into Kerpal’s hands. “That’s 1,000 rupees for you. For your work. Use another 3,000 for guards and arms.”

Kerpal’s face twitched with something close to pride. “It will be done.”

“And I’ll need a piece myself,” Charles said.

The next morning, Charles stepped into James & Sons Gunhouse, a British supplier near Fort William. Rows of muskets and pistols lined the walls, brass gleaming.

“I want something solid,” he said to the shopkeeper. “Not a parade piece.”

The man showed him a .69 calibre flintlock pistol, British-made, used by East India Company officers. The mark read “New Land Pattern 1801”. Charles bought it on the spot, along with powder, flint, and spare balls, and a hardened leather case. He also purchased a Gurkha-made kukri, its curved blade sheathed in goatskin, weight balanced like a well-fed fist.

At home, he strapped the pistol under his coat and the knife to his hip.

Then he hired three guards, all former Company soldiers — silent, mustached men with lean frames and hard eyes. Each carried a Charleville musket, and slept in the servants' quarters by turns, watching the garden and the road through the night.

Trouble had come to the plantation once.

Charles didn’t intend to let it come again.

By 1806, Charles Harker had disappeared from the London slums like a stone dropped into the Ganges — and risen elsewhere. His face was now known in the tea rooms of Chowringhee, his boots polished by a servant who never made eye contact, his tobacco trimmed and dried to the leaf, his shirts pressed by the hour. He had grown into his money with care, not flash — but it showed.

Some evenings he dined at The Bengal Club, where French merchants spoke in tight accents about textile prices and sea tariffs, and Portuguese traders sipped red wine with kohl-eyed mistresses waiting in hired carriages. Other nights, he drifted through the lights of Sonagachi, quiet as a tiger, the courtyards behind the brothels thick with women draped in silks that slipped too easily from shoulder to floor. He preferred the quiet ones, the ones who didn't ask much, who smoked opium with him after and left him to the haze.

He had two pipes now, one brass, one carved ivory.

And every night, he smoked.

Not always to forget, but never to remember.

The "Elephant" was everywhere now — from the narrow alleys behind the spice market to the edge of the Hooghly docks, in hand-rolled pipes or shared on charpoy beds in Arthur's ever-expanding string of dens. The logo was known in whispers: an elephant holding a poppy in its trunk, stamped in red ink on the side of crates and bricks. Men asked for it by name.

He still worked the land during season. The plantations had doubled, stretching now into fields that touched the horizon. Kerpal ran them like a general, riding out on horseback from dawn till dark, shouting in Hindi and Bhojpuri, the villagers clearing paths as he passed.

"You plant like that and I'll hang the field with salt!" he barked one morning. "Even the rats won't eat what you grow!"

Charles only visited once a week now, unless it was harvest. He walked the rows at dusk, feeling the stalks between his fingers, measuring their weight and height like a banker's eye on ledgers.

Each year, the crates filled the warehouses, and each year, Arthur's ship rolled into Canton, and then back, the ledger line climbing without pause. The men were paid. The guards were loyal. The rifles were oiled. The Bank of Hindostan held his name on its thickest account book.

He had asked them one day — just out of curiosity — for his balance.

The clerk, a thin-lipped Bengali man in a blue waistcoat, blinked at the paper, adjusted his spectacles, and said, "Sir Harker… your account now rests at… two hundred thirty-nine thousand, six hundred sterling. Not including interest."

Charles had nodded once. "Good."

Arthur, too, had changed. He no longer smelled of rum at breakfast. He now kept a three-room apartment above a stable, wore linen dyed French blue, and carried a pistol with an ivory grip. The man still drank — no doubt — and no coin lasted long in his pocket, but he hadn't missed a delivery in five years.

They met once a month, usually over drink, sometimes over cards.

“This time next year,” Arthur said once, “we’ll have so much silver, we’ll be sleeping in it.”

Charles sipped from a glass of French brandy and said, “You’ll be sleeping under it if you start skipping crates.”

Arthur laughed, flicked ash from his cigar, and said, “I’d sooner kill my own mother.”

Some nights, Charles sat among Frenchmen, Portuguese brokers, old English East India hands with thinning hair and land dreams gone sour. He listened more than he spoke, losing small coins at cards, watching who smiled too quickly or folded too slow. He learned which ships moved what, which names to trust, which ports to avoid during certain tides.

By now, he knew every crooked road in Calcutta. Every merchant street, every back alley, every guard post, every tavern worth sitting in and every brothel worth leaving in the dark.

He had built an empire from crates and sap, and no one had stopped him yet.

But every time he lit the pipe and leaned back into the white curtain of smoke, the same thought returned.

“This started in the gutters,” he’d whisper, “and it’ll end in palaces.”

1806

The wind rolled across the dry October fields, lifting dust in thin spirals as the first rows of poppy were being marked. The workers moved like lines of ants, hoes over their shoulders, bent backs under the mid-morning sun. From the edge of the field, Charles watched them, boots pressed into dry soil, arms folded. The smell of sweat, clay, and the faint rot of compost clung to the air. Another year had begun. He took a long draw from his ivory pipe, the Elephant blend burning slow and clean.

In the distance, a bullock cart creaked toward the plantation. A man rode up front, dressed in khaki linen and a tan turban, holding a notebook and seal pouch at his side. The cart halted by the gate, and a young boy ran to the house to announce the arrival.

Charles stepped out, straightening his collar. The officer dismounted, eyed the house, the fields, then Charles himself with a look sharpened by something more than duty.

"You are the landholder here?" the officer asked in clipped English.

"I am. Charles Harker. What can I help you with?"

The man opened his notebook, flipped a page, then looked out over the neat rows of planting.

"You are growing poppy."

"That's right."

"You're aware that unlicensed cultivation of opium poppy on Company land is prohibited?"

"This isn't Company land. I bought it outright."

"Ownership does not exempt you. The crop must be destroyed."

Charles stared at him, pipe cooling in his hand. "There is no law banning poppy cultivation for private agricultural purposes."

The officer's eyes narrowed. "This land falls under Bengal jurisdiction. The British East India Company has exclusive rights to opium trade and production. Your crop is illegal. I must report this."

Charles took a slow breath. "Is it the plant that offends the Company… or the Elephant?"

Before the officer could reply, footsteps approached from behind. Kerpal came down from the house, wiping his hands on his tunic. He looked once at the officer, squinted, then said in Hindi, "Devraj? Devraj Bhaskar?"

The officer turned. His posture eased slightly. "Kerpal?" he replied, first surprised, then smiling. "By the gods… I thought you were dead."

Kerpal laughed. "Only from heat. You remember my father? Hari Nath?"

"Of course. He taught me to swim in the Damodar." Devraj turned back toward Charles. "This is your malik?"

"He is," Kerpal said. "He treats us well. Pays fair. Never once struck a man or cheated a deal."

Devraj hesitated. He adjusted the buttons of his coat, cleared his throat. "Still, the Company is not pleased. This Elephant brand—people ask for it now. The agents hear it from farmers, from Canton traders. It's undermining the supply chain."

Charles reached into his coat and drew out his cheque book. He flipped it open with one hand, glanced at Kerpal, and then scrawled a sum in crisp ink. He tore the cheque loose and offered it to Devraj.

“Compensation for the misunderstanding. And to ensure we stay… understood.”

Devraj looked down at the cheque: five hundred rupees — a small fortune for a local officer. He took it slowly, eyes flicking between the ink and Charles’s face. Then he smiled.

“I’ll note your plantation as medicinal and private cultivation,” he said. “No export noted. Should trouble arise again, I’ll handle it.”

He stepped forward, placed one hand on Charles’s shoulder, and patted it like an uncle greeting a son. “Be careful. What grows from opium is not always a flower.”

Then he turned to Kerpal. “You’ve done well. You always knew where the river bends.”

With that, he returned to his cart and rode off.

Charles stood still a moment, then looked at Kerpal.

“That was close,” he said.

Kerpal nodded. “His uncle once owned half a village. I saved his sister from a jackal when we were children.”

Charles chuckled and pulled his cheque book again. He wrote out another sum — two hundred rupees — and handed it to Kerpal.

“You’re not just field overseer anymore. Consider this a promotion.”

Kerpal raised his brow, grinned, and tucked the cheque into his shirt. “I’ll have to start wearing shoes now.”

“Just don’t forget which side you’re standing on.”

Kerpal bowed lightly. “I never have.”

The quiet hum of insects and distant barking dogs blanketed the night, the soft breeze swaying the sugar palms around the plantation house. Inside, Charles lay in his cot, shirt half-unbuttoned, the last of the pipe’s smoke still curled in the rafters. A brass lamp flickered low beside him, shadows crawling along the walls.

Then came a cry. Sharp. Frantic.

Another shout. Then the unmistakable ring of steel clashing.

Charles sat up, heart already hammering. “Gun,” he muttered, reaching for the flintlock on the shelf. Footsteps sounded outside, boots on packed earth. He shoved the door open and stepped into the hot night air.

“Up! All of you—up now!” he bellowed into the hallway.

Three guards came rushing from their cots, rifles already in hand. Another, already lacing his boots, grabbed his long knife and followed. Outside, the shouting grew louder, a desperate voice crying out in pain.

They sprinted across the field toward the sound, past the poppy rows shivering in moonlight. The scene met them just beyond the eastern boundary: five figures in dark rags, their heads wrapped, faces mostly hidden, circling one of the plantation guards. Blades flashed in the dark — curved machetes, hacking with wild rhythm. The guard fought back with a broken pole, bleeding from the scalp.

“There!” Charles raised his gun. “Stop!”

But the attackers didn’t.

One of them turned, let out a hoarse yell, and rushed toward Charles.

“Shoot them!” Charles shouted.

The world narrowed. A gunshot cracked beside him, then another.

Charles’s own musket fired — the flint sparked, the hammer fell, and the ball punched into a man’s stomach. He collapsed forward, limbs twitching in the dirt. Another attacker, throat bursting from a second shot, dropped without sound.

The others fled — three of them — vanishing into the night like rats, machetes dragging in the dust.

The guard who had been attacked staggered back, breathing in broken gasps, his shirt soaked in blood. One of the other guards caught him by the arm and eased him down.

“Gopal,” Charles said, kneeling. “You alive?”

The man nodded slowly, eyes wide with shock.

Charles stood. “Bury the dead behind the warehouse. No noise. No fire. Just the shovels.”

One guard hesitated. “You think they’ll come back, sahib?”

Charles looked down at the two corpses, both sprawled in the grass like broken sacks. Their blades were old but clean, their clothing too new for vagrants.

“They weren’t thieves,” Charles said. “And they weren’t alone.”

“You think the Company sent them?” asked one of the guards, lowering his rifle.

Charles said nothing for a while. The poppy rows rustled gently. “Maybe,” he said. “Or maybe someone else in this trade thinks I’ve grown too fast. Too loud.”

“But the Company is—”

“Large,” Charles interrupted. “Too large to be sloppy. But that doesn’t mean some dog on a leash didn’t slip off. Could be a warning. Could be an attempt to bleed me slow.”

The guard wiped his mouth. “What now?”

Charles looked at them all, his eyes hard under the moon.

“From now on, anyone steps on this land without my word… shoot them. I don’t care if they’re barefoot or wearing a Company sash. Shoot first.”

The guards nodded. One of them turned to fetch shovels.

Charles watched as they dragged the two bodies by the ankles toward the warehouse. Blood streaked the dirt behind them like black paint under moonlight. The fields stood silent once more.

He glanced up at the poppy rows, already waist-high, and muttered, “No one gets in the way of the Elephant.”

The air had thickened with the sharp smell of drying poppy as another harvest rolled in, the third since Charles’s first sowing. The warehouse was full again, bricks stacked in neat pyramids stamped with the elephant-and-poppy sigil. Arthur had left a week earlier with the cargo—this time 180 crates packed tight below the deck of *Marlin’s Jaw*—his orders clear, his cut agreed.

The Calcutta heat made the wooden beams of the house groan in the afternoons. Charles sat shirtless in his study, the ceiling fan above creaking with lazy rhythm. He was cleaning his pistol when the knock came.

A tall, thin man with oiled hair and round spectacles stood at the door, sweating through his pale yellow coat. He held a leather folder and introduced himself as Tapan Bose, a clerk from the land deeds office.

“I’ve come regarding your holdings in Patna District,” the man said politely, stepping inside with small, precise movements. “There seems to have been an error… in valuation.”

Charles gestured to the empty chair. “Sit.”

Tapan Bose sat, adjusting his glasses. “Upon reexamination of the survey maps, it appears that the land deed issued was calculated at a rate below the current regional scale. The government expects correction.”

Charles leaned back, his brow flat. “What kind of correction?”

“Four thousand rupees, sir. To balance the discrepancy.”

Charles tilted his head, slowly setting the pistol on the table.

“Funny,” he said, “that this correction comes nearly a year after the deal. Not a letter. No word. Just a clerk sweating in my house with a folder in hand.”

Tapan Bose swallowed. “The matter came to our attention during a recent audit.”

Charles didn’t answer. He reached for his opium pipe and tapped it gently, then filled it with a soft fingerful from the brass box beside him.

“Which family are you from, Bose?”

The man blinked. “Pardon?”

“Your family. In Calcutta. Who do you belong to?”

“Ah… well… my uncle is with the Excise. My father was in trade, sir, in Bhagalpur.”

“I see.” Charles lit the pipe, drew slowly, eyes narrowed. “This valuation problem—whose idea was it? Yours?”

“I… I was instructed to—”

“No,” Charles said, standing now, the pipe in hand, smoke curling between his fingers. “No, you weren’t. You walked in here expecting I’d pay and smile. You didn’t expect questions. So either you’re clever, or someone sent you. And if they sent you, they should’ve sent someone who doesn’t blink so much.”

Tapan Bose shifted in his seat, visibly pale now. “Perhaps there was a miscommunication. The notice may not have been—”

Charles walked to his desk, picked up his cheque book, and tore out a page after scribbling.

“Here. Five hundred rupees.”

Bose looked confused.

“That should correct whatever... misfiled misunderstanding the office had. No more letters. No more visits. You bring up my land again without a senior officer, I’ll assume you’re robbing me.”

Bose took the cheque, folded it into his coat quickly.

“I understand. I’ll make sure this matter is closed, Mr. Harker. And if anything arises—I can help. Quietly.”

Charles exhaled smoke and nodded. “Good. Close the door behind you.”

When Bose left, Charles bolted the door and returned to his pipe. He stretched out on the long couch, head tilted back, smoke crawling from his lips to the rafters above. The sun was fading into orange and red over the edge of the plantation. Somewhere distant, a flute played lazily from the worker lodgings. He smoked again, the warmth settling in his spine, and closed his eyes.

In his dreams, the elephants walked through the poppy fields, their feet red with sap.

By the time 1813 rolled in, Arthur was no longer the beast he’d once been. His hands, once quick to lash out and faster to steer a ship in the dark, now trembled around a cup. His laugh had grown hoarse and hollow, the kind a man lets out when too much of his life has slipped through his fingers.

Charles noticed it. Everyone did.

But loyalty was heavy currency in his trade, and Arthur still had a name in Canton. So Charles gave him the job — 150 crates of Elephant’s finest, bricks stamped clean and rich with perfume, bound for the coast near Macau. "Two hundred sterling per crate," Charles said, counting them twice. "You return with thirty thousand. Nothing less."

Arthur only grinned, lips dry. “I’ll bring you gold wrapped in silk.”

Two months passed. No word. No coin. No smoke signal from the shore.

Charles paced the nights in his Calcutta house. One morning, eyes bleary from the pipe, he went looking — through the taverns near the port, down gutters that stank of piss and boiled rice, under awnings where men slept with knives under their shirts.

He found him.

There, slumped beside a doorway behind the grain market, Arthur lay with his shirt open, one boot missing, eyes bloodshot and dry.

“Arthur,” Charles said quietly.

Arthur stirred, rubbed his mouth. “Well, if it isn’t the Emperor himself.”

Charles crouched beside him. “Where’s my thirty thousand?”

Arthur coughed into his sleeve. “Chinese stiffed me,” he muttered. “Gave me fifteen. That’s all.”

“And?”

Arthur reached into his coat and handed over a wrapped pouch. Inside: twelve thousand sterling, counted in mixed coin and faded Company notes.

“Three thousand for passage, port fees,” Arthur said, scratching at his neck. “You know how it is.”

Charles looked at him a long time, no expression in his face.

Then he stood.

“You should rest, Arthur,” he said.

Arthur gave him a broken grin. “Always did love your hospitality.”

Charles didn’t answer. He turned and walked back through the alleyways. The air smelled of smoke and fish oil. That night, he sat long in the chair by the veranda, smoking and listening to the distant howls of dogs. Something inside him clicked quiet. The man he had trusted most had stolen from him — and maybe always would again.

By morning, Charles boarded a merchant ship bound east, a low-decked Portuguese hauler running through the monsoon gaps. It took three weeks through rough waters, the sky often grey and sullen. But when they reached the bay near Macau, the clouds broke.

Charles went straight to Liang Wu´s post, where he still ran his smuggler’s court from behind carved wooden doors. The place was alive with laughter and smoke. Charles stepped inside, ducked through the curtain, and was met by the same narrow-eyed gaze.

“Mr. Harker,” Liang Wu said with a grin. “You’ve grown pale. Too much sitting in your garden, no?”

Charles sat down without a smile.

“I came to ask,” he said, “whether a man named Arthur brought you a shipment. A month or two ago. One hundred fifty crates. Elephant.”

Liang Wu nodded. “Yes. I received it. Sealed as always, perfect condition. He drank one of my bottles before leaving. I paid him thirty thousand, as agreed.”

Charles let the silence stretch. Then he nodded.

“Then you’re still in trade.”

Liang Wu laughed. “And so are you.”

“No more Arthur,” Charles said, eyes hard.

“I expected that,” Liang Wu replied. “He looked… torn.”

Charles stood, straightening his coat.

“Supply will continue. On time. But the ship’s crew will be new.”

Liang Wu gave a small bow with his head. “I’ll wait for the Elephant.”

Outside, the wind picked up along the harbor, flapping the sailcloth and flags like snapping teeth. Charles stood watching it for a moment, his jaw locked tight, and then walked back toward the docks.

Three weeks later, the sails of a slow Canton vessel folded like tired wings as Charles stepped back onto Calcutta’s docks. The air was hot and wet, the river brackish with morning stink. He didn’t stop. From the port, he went straight to his plantation, where the crates of the next harvest were being stacked inside the rebuilt warehouse, fresh marks of the elephant-and-poppy still drying on the wood.

Charles called for two guards—Rajin and Satto, both quiet men with loaded muskets slung over their backs—and they set out toward the city with dusk already creeping through the banyan trees.

The search began in the wine rooms of Company’s End, moved down through the betel-stained lanes behind the spice market, and down again to the riverside lodgings where windows were broken and dogs ran wild between the huts. By nightfall, their boots were heavy with street dust and sweat.

Then Rajin spotted him.

Arthur sat half-slumped in a broken-backed chair outside a hole of a tavern called *The Crow’s Nest*, bottle in hand, shirt dark with old vomit, boots caked with mud. His eyes fluttered open when Charles stepped forward out of the dark.

“Well now,” Arthur slurred. “Look what the tide dragged back.”

Charles didn’t speak for a moment. Then, calm and steady: “I went to Liang Wu.”

Arthur’s brow twitched.

“He paid thirty thousand,” Charles continued. “Just like we agreed.”

Arthur took a swig and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I made the damn trip, didn’t I? I risked the storm, bribed the port officers, carried every last box. I gave myself a payday.”

Charles’s face stayed still. “That’s not how business works. There were agreements.”

Arthur leaned forward. “Agreements? You sit in your house, smoking your own poison, counting money while I rot on a deck in rain and rats. You think a man like me owes you loyalty?”

“I asked once,” Charles said. “Now I’m asking again. Give me the rest of my money.”

Arthur’s eyes flicked to the two armed guards standing silent behind Charles. His face twisted.

“You threatening me, rat?” he snarled, standing suddenly.

He threw a punch that landed square on Charles’s jaw. Charles staggered back, blood in his mouth. The guards surged forward, but Arthur moved like a cornered bull—he slammed a fist into Rajin’s face, dropping him cold to the dirt, then twisted toward Satto, snatching the knife from his belt in a blur of motion.

He lunged.

And the gunshot cracked the night open like thunder.

Arthur stopped mid-step, eyes wide, then fell forward with a dull thud. The knife clattered beside his hand, twitching once before stillness.

Charles stood holding the smoking flintlock, his breath heaving. The world around him shrank to silence—just the faint rattle of wind through broken shutters, and a rat scuttling somewhere near the drain.

Satto sat up slowly, groaning and wiping blood from his lip. Charles stepped over Arthur’s body and crouched down, reaching into the man’s coat. He pulled out a pouch lined with red cotton and opened it—inside, 2800 sterlings, most of it in mixed coin and crumpled Company notes.

He stood up and turned to the guards.

“Get up,” he said to Rajin, who groaned and stirred. “Back to the plantation. I’ll walk alone.”

The guards nodded, shaken but silent, and disappeared into the dark.

Charles walked the road to his house with the slow step of a man carrying both weight and clarity. When he entered, he washed his hands, loaded the pipe with the dark sticky paste of Elephant, and smoked without blinking, the opium numbing the noise inside.

The night pressed against the windows like a tide.

He sat long in his chair, staring at nothing. Then he lay down without undressing, pipe still warm in his hand, and let sleep take him.

Three days had passed since Arthur's body was lowered into a shallow grave behind a tavern that would forget him by the week's end. Charles had said nothing of it to Kerpal, and the man hadn't asked. There were things understood between them that needed no explanation.

That morning, Kerpal arrived at the garden gate, wiping his brow with the edge of his turban and walking with purpose.

"Kerpal," Charles said, stepping into the shaded verandah. "We must speak of transport."

Kerpal nodded. Charles was tapping ash from the long-bowled pipe into a clay dish. "We need someone we can trust. No drunks. No thieves. Someone with steady hands and quiet lips."

Kerpal folded his arms. "There is one. A relative of my mother's cousin. His name is Govind Das. His family has known mine since before the Company's flag touched Bengal. He owns a modest cargo ship—*Shanti Vahan*—makes trade between here and the Pearl River. Carries silks, rice, copper. Honest work."

Charles looked up. "He sails to Canton?"

"He does," Kerpal said. "Not directly. But close enough. He makes port near Guangzhou and takes smaller boats upriver. If we load the crates in secret, he can deliver without drawing attention. But—"

Charles waited.

Kerpal continued, "—it will cost. Not in gold. The man is no fool, but he is not greedy. A few hundred rupees, no more. He pays cheap labor, keeps no Company ties, no questions."

Charles stood. "Let's speak with him."

They walked down through the narrow lanes of Calcutta's Old Quarter, where painted cows nosed past the alleys and the scent of spice and sweat hung thick as river mist. At a low house built from old Portuguese stone, a boy opened the door and led them inside.

Govind Das was in the back courtyard, seated beneath a neem tree, wrapping jute twine around a hemp sack. He looked up as Kerpal approached, then rose slowly, wiping his hands.

"Kerpal-ji," he said with a slight bow. "It has been many years."

"Too many," Kerpal said with a warm grin. "This is Charles-saab. He is... in need of travel for certain goods."

Govind's brow lifted slightly. "I carry many goods."

“These are crates,” Kerpal explained, “sealed and stamped. You needn’t open them. Deliver them to a man in Canton named Liang Wu, in the quarter by the white lotus temple. He will pay you. You take your agreed sum. Return the rest.”

Govind scratched his beard thoughtfully. “How many crates?”

Charles spoke now. “One hundred, sometimes more. All uniform. Packed clean. We load them after dark. No guards. Just men and carts.”

Govind looked from one to the other. “What’s inside?”

Kerpal raised a hand. “Not your concern.”

There was a pause, then the man nodded. “I have sailed worse. And I’ve trusted Kerpal since I was small enough to hide in his house’s grain baskets.”

Kerpal laughed. “And you broke every one of my mother’s clay pots.”

Govind smiled. “I will sail in five days. Bring the crates. I will make port near Guangzhou and send a boy ahead to Wu. The rest is done.”

Charles reached into his coat and produced a folded bundle of rupees. “Half now. Half when you return.”

Govind weighed it briefly in his hand and tucked it away. “Done.”

They shook hands—Charles’s pale fingers against Govind’s darker, rope-callused grip.

As they stepped out into the street again, Kerpal turned to Charles. “This is better,” he said. “No drunks, no whores, no loud mouths. Just quiet men with steady work.”

Charles nodded. “It’ll do.”

That night, he returned to his house, stood under the porch watching the sun slip down behind the trees, and lit his pipe in silence. A steady wind blew from the east, carrying the scent of river reeds and brick dust.

He felt the tide had shifted—and for now, it ran in his favor.

Burma

By the early months of 1814, the humid season rolled in heavy across the plains, and Charles Harker sat beneath the awning of his veranda, looking out across the distant haze that swelled over the poppy fields. Smoke curled from the pipe in his hand, but his thoughts were far beyond Calcutta. Word had come that British oversight was tightening again in

Bihar and Bengal—prices were inching up, and murmurs of Company intervention were growing louder.

It was time to spread the roots.

He had heard from Kerpal of a promising territory — Upper Burma. Thick jungle, fractured hills, winding rivers, and, more importantly, less Company reach. Too wild, too untamed for direct governance. But opium could thrive there if guided with a careful hand.

Charles turned to Kerpal one morning over tea. “Your eldest—what’s his name again?”

“Nabin,” Kerpal replied. “Twenty-eight. Strong mind. Doesn’t talk unless it matters.”

Charles smiled. “I want him to go east. Far east. Upper Burma. I’ll fund it. He scouts the land, buys what he can. Clears it, if it’s not already. Starts something new.”

Kerpal tilted his head slightly. “He’s not afraid of the jungle. He was there once, some years ago. He knows the people. He’ll need money.”

“I’ll give him two hundred sterling. And seed enough for a hundred fields.”

Kerpal nodded slowly. “He’ll need men. Let him take friends. Boys from the village. Men who want better than harvesting jute or breaking stone.”

So it was arranged. On a clear morning under a sky stripped of clouds, Nabin stood at the edge of the plantation road, a cloth pack slung over his shoulder, three other men with him. One carried a steel-tipped walking stick. Another had a small bag of tools, rope, tarps, and ledgers. Behind them, two carts with grain, preserved rations, sacks of opium seed wrapped in oilskin, and the sterling sealed in a wooden box padded with cloth.

Charles handed the box to Nabin himself. “Don’t be foolish with this,” he said. “It’s more than money. It’s foundation.”

Nabin took it with both hands. “I won’t waste it, sahib.”

“Write me every month,” Charles said. “Even if nothing happens.”

“We’ll find land,” Nabin said. “I already know where the ground is good. And who to speak to.”

It took them twenty-six days of river barge, back-jungle footpath, and mule cart trails to reach the edge of Upper Burma’s quieter districts. They arrived at the mouth of a small town nestled beside the Shan hills, where narrow teak bridges crossed lazy rivers and thick forest crept in at every edge.

At the local land office—a squat clay structure with two rooms and a wide shade tree—Nabin waited outside while one of the others stepped in to speak. The clerk, a sharp-eyed Burmese man in a long faded jacket, emerged shortly after.

“You come to buy?” the man asked in stiff Hindustani.

Nabin nodded. “We look for land. Good soil. Not too wet.”

The clerk sniffed. “Everything is wet. But there’s land, yes. Some jungle cleared. Five miles east. Villagers gave it up—too far from temple.”

“We’ll see it,” Nabin said.

A small escort led them there by cart. After an hour rattling down a root-choked path, they emerged onto a high clearing—dense green in all directions, but the center was scraped earth, flat, open, ringed by ash-black tree stumps and hummocks of turned soil.

“This’ll do,” Nabin said quietly.

They made the purchase two days later. The clerk took his share and filed crude records by hand. No one asked what crop would be planted. No one wanted to know.

Nabin hired a half-dozen locals from the village—a boy with a twisted arm who still could carry tools, two older men who once worked tea fields, and three younger men looking for coin. They brought hoes and spades, cleared the ground, and within a week, the field rows began to form.

Within the next few weeks, a small wooden warehouse was erected on flat stone—simple beams, packed earth floor, straw roof, single lock. The seed sacks were stored inside, carefully hidden beneath layers of grain.

At dusk, Nabin sat on a rock beside the warehouse, watching the men tamp down the last rows of earth by foot.

“We’ll start planting once the sky dries a little,” one of the village men said.

Nabin nodded. “We have the seed. And enough coin for one year. After that, the crop feeds itself.”

The man looked at him. “And what do we call this place?”

Nabin glanced at the hills, where shadows stretched like fingers over the treetops. “For now? Call it quiet.”

He reached into his satchel, pulled out ink and paper, and began to write a letter to Charles.

By mid-1815, the rains had passed over Upper Burma, and the air clung thick and slow to the rows of ripening poppies. Nabin sat by candlelight in the warehouse, scrawling neat characters onto parchment—his monthly letter home. Beside him, a jar of boiled water, a folded cloth, a simple account ledger, and a rusting lamp that wheezed as it burned. Outside, frogs croaked and a pair of men argued softly in a dialect he only half understood.

“Respected father,” he wrote, “the land is strong, and the crop has taken well. The rows are straight, the soil keeps its hold, and the sap is dark. We lost two workers to fever last month. I paid the funerary costs to their families. I've hired five new ones from the eastern ridge village—they work harder than the last. No talk of rebellion, no trouble yet. One clerk came sniffing about the legality of poppy, but his silence was bought for thirty rupees and a bottle of strong gin. We carry on.”

Kerpal received the letter two weeks later and chuckled when he finished reading it. He passed it to Charles who sat beside him under the high ceiling fan at the Calcutta house, sipping rice liquor.

“Your man does well,” Kerpal said.

“He does,” Charles replied. “That boy’s got a straight spine. If he keeps going like this, we’ll have Burma under poppy by the end of the decade.”

Kerpal dipped his pen in ink and scrawled a quick reply:

“Nabin, proud of your work. Your crop is a finger raised to those who doubt us. If you need more hands, or seed, or coin—just ask. Keep the field steady and the men honest. Will come see soon.”

By late August, Nabin’s second letter arrived: the pods had begun to swell. Fields white-tipped with poppy heads shimmered in the heat. A few laborers had taken ill, but the new workers held up well. A second small warehouse had been added, and the jungle edge was pushed back by five more rows. Only one more clerk came asking questions, and he too left satisfied—with his pockets lined and his mouth shut.

It was October when Charles and Kerpal finally made the journey to Burma. They arrived on horseback, dust-covered, coughing from the dry trail, their escort quiet and lean. Nabin met them at the road, waving from a shaded ridge.

“You didn’t say you built a road,” Charles said as they dismounted.

“Didn’t need to,” Nabin replied. “It was there when I needed it.”

They passed through the lower fields—poppies shoulder-high, workers bending and walking the rows. The jungle buzzed with insects, and thin white smoke coiled from the cookfires.

Charles stopped to inspect a row, brushing his fingers against the pods. “This is the good kind,” he said. “The thick oil. You can feel it in the skin.”

Kerpal nodded. “Looks better than our first crop.”

In the warehouse, bricks from early sap harvests were already laid out on planks, drying under netted cloth.

Nabin watched them look around. “We’ve five hundred pods left to lance. Next week. I keep the knives sharp myself. Haven’t lost a batch yet.”

Charles clapped a hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got a plantation here, Nabin. A real one. You’ll be rich before you’re thirty.”

Kerpal added with a smirk, “And if not, you’ll at least die more comfortably than most.”

They stayed only the day. As the sun dipped low, casting red light across the field, the three of them stood at the edge of the jungle.

“Next time,” Charles said, “you ride out to us.”

Nabin nodded. “Bring the seed. I’ll bring the land.”

They turned their horses and rode back down the dusty trail, leaving Nabin behind in the high silence of the hills, surrounded by his poppies.

By late March, the lowlands of Upper Burma baked under a shrinking sky. The harvest was in — they lanced the poppy pods, collected the sap, and did light drying to form a semi-solid lumps. It was loaded into cheap crates. A thin film of dust clung to everything. The jungle buzzed and clicked with life. A rider came up the path, waving a cloth above his head.

“They’re here,” the boy shouted. “Kerpal’s men.”

Nabin met the group at the edge of the field—four carts drawn by sweating horses, each cart lined with straw and canvas.

“You’ll take them all?” he asked the leader, a bearded man with a calm face.

“All of it. That’s the order,” the man replied, tightening a rope around one of the carts. “We bring raw opium to Patna. They do the cut and press better than we can here.”

Nabin nodded. “Good. Tell Kerpal—no spoilage, eh?”

The man grinned. “That’s on the packing, sahib.”

The next morning, the carts rolled out just after dawn, axle-deep in river mud. Nabin stood at the edge of the road and watched them disappear.

With the field quiet now and the warehouse emptied, Nabin returned to his papers. He wrote by oil lamp:

“Father, the crop is harvested, carts have taken all to Patna. I will remain here, perhaps visit you soon. No troubles this month. Weather dry, some cattle stolen, but I chased the thieves off. A boy died of fever. I sent coins to his mother. Otherwise, the plantation breathes.”

Weeks passed. The bricks arrived at Charles’s main estate near Patna District and were taken in by practiced hands. Under Kerpal’s oversight, the sticky brown sap was folded, pressed, and shaped into strong uniform bricks. The smell hung low in the warehouse, sweet and earthy, like rust and honey.

Kerpal leaned over a pile of the drying product and turned one of the bricks over with a hooked stick.

“This batch will fetch good price,” he said. “Better than last year.”

Charles, who sat near the warehouse door with a cup of chai, nodded. “It always does when you’ve had your fingers on it.”

Kerpal grinned. “And when the Burmese don’t water it down.”

Charles glanced toward the far end of the estate where a thin man in sailor’s cloth approached—Govind Das, his new carrier.

Govind bowed lightly. “Sahib.”

“You’ve come for the crates?” Charles asked.

“Yes, sir. Two hundred bricks. I will sail at dusk.”

“You know the buyer?”

Govind tapped his chest. “Liang Wu, same place, same price.”

Charles stood, handing him a sealed note with totals and instructions. “You’re reliable, Das. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t, sahib. Honest man gets his cut.”

Charles smiled faintly. “And what is your cut?”

“Eight rupees a crate,” Govind replied without hesitation.

Charles turned to Kerpal. “See? Man knows his worth. Pay him what he’s due.”

Kerpal gave a nod and gestured to the workers. They loaded the crates with practiced speed. The sun had already begun to sink as Govind's cart rolled away toward the port, the air full of dusk and the smell of opium.

At home that evening, Charles sat with his feet up, a pipe lit, smoke curling near the rafters.

"Das will come back," he said aloud, half to himself. "Not like the last one."

Kerpal, sipping slowly nearby, said, "That one's not sailing anymore, sahib. He's just another body in the ledger."

Charles took a long draw. "This one's better. Cleaner."

"And cheaper," Kerpal muttered.

They sat in silence for a while, the shadows thickening across the floor as the pipes burned low.

The rains had only just faded when the planting season began in 1816, but from the hills of Patna to the jungles of Upper Burma, something was wrong. Kerpal stood outside Charles's estate

"He did not write this month," he said, voice low, eyes dark. "Every month, Charles. Even during fever. Even when the thieves came."

Charles looked up from his ledger, seeing the man's hand trembling.

"He's never missed a letter?" Charles asked.

"Never," Kerpal said. "My boy would write every time."

Charles stood and closed the ledger. "Then we ride. Get three of the guards, guns and gear. We leave before the sun burns off."

By afternoon they were galloping through the haze, rifles strapped across backs, packs bouncing against saddles. Kerpal rode hard, the veins in his temples raised like braided rope. Charles kept ahead, pistol beneath his coat and his thoughts heavy. Thirteen days they rode, barely stopping to sleep. Villages blurred past, jungle closed in, the sky a constant threat of downpour.

When they reached the edge of the plantation, a heavy silence hung like a fog. The fields that once bloomed with pale flowers now reeked of rot and blood. Bodies lay twisted in the dirt—farmers, boys, old men—all hacked or pierced, some blackened with flies.

Kerpal leapt from his horse before it had even stopped and sprinted down the muddy rows. He called his son's name again and again.

"Naabin! Naabin!"

Then he fell silent.

Near the warehouse, in a ditch choked with weeds, a single body lay facedown in the mud. The clothes were familiar. Kerpal fell to his knees, turned the boy gently. Nabin's eyes were open to the sky, and the side of his neck was torn open by a blade.

Charles said nothing, only took off his hat and bowed his head. Kerpal placed a hand over his son's chest and whispered something in the old tongue.

That evening, they went to the nearest town—little more than a cluster of thatched roofs and a clay courthouse. The official there, a narrow man with hollow cheeks, stared blankly as Kerpal described the bodies.

"They were my workers," Kerpal said. "He was my son."

"We do not govern those hills," the official muttered. "Too near the tribes. It's wild land."

"You will send a man to count the dead," Charles snapped. "Or I will ride to the Governor in Patna and tell him your name."

The man agreed, nervously scratching the ledger. The next day, Nabin was buried near the edge of the fields. Charles had a large stone moved from the edge of the jungle and placed on the grave. Kerpal placed a flower at its base and stood there till dusk, unmoving.

But vengeance burned.

That night, they laid in wait—three guards with loaded muskets crouched low behind crates. Kerpal and Charles hid in the brush, eyes fixed on the jungle's edge. Nothing moved. The moon passed high, then dipped behind cloud.

The next morning, just before light cracked the trees, movement stirred. A group of six emerged slowly from the dense foliage—dark men with painted faces, bare-chested, their spears tall and gleaming in the faint light. Two carried bows, strung and ready. They moved like ghosts among the crates, shifting planks, looking behind barrels, glancing toward the burnt fields.

One of them bent to the earth, picked something up—perhaps a bone.

Charles's hand tightened around the stock of his rifle. He glanced sideways at Kerpal, whose mouth was a line drawn hard.

They were not here to steal. They were looking for something else. Looking for what they had done. Looking to erase it.

The cry came sharp from Charles's throat — "Now!" — and the five men burst from the bushes like wolves let loose. The tribesmen turned, startled, weapons lifting in hands already stained with red. Charles raised his flintlock, aimed quick and fired — the shot

cracked out and struck the bowman clean through the skull, snapping his head back as his body folded in the dirt. A second shot rang beside him, and another tribesman with bow collapsed, pierced through the chest. Two of the guards dropped to one knee, bracing themselves to fire, and their shots tore into two more attackers, sending them sprawling.

Only two of the original six stood. The rest of the men reached for their powder horns and began the labor of reloading, but the tribesmen had already seen their moment. Spears came flashing through the air — one struck Charles in the shoulder, deep and burning. He stumbled back with a grunt, but didn't fall. Another spear pierced the belly of the guard beside him, who gasped, dropped his powder, and crumpled.

Then a scream — wet, tearing — a tribesman had jumped on one of the younger guards and sunk his teeth deep into the man's neck, ripping through flesh like a beast. Blood fountained. But before another moment passed, Kerpal raised his musket — the only one yet unused — and fired. The tribesman's chest exploded with the impact, and he collapsed in the mud.

One of the two remaining guards, hands slick, had managed to shove powder and ball down the muzzle. He raised the weapon and fired — the shot struck the last standing man from the original group straight through the stomach. He fell shrieking, clutching his insides.

Then came the others — four more bursting from the jungle brush with yells like animals. They hurled themselves into the fray with bone knives, rusted machetes, and screams of hate. One slammed into Charles, knocking him flat. The tribesman's fingers wrapped tight around his throat. Charles kicked and clawed, but the breath was gone. A blade flashed — one of the guards, still alive, swung a machete and sliced through the attacker's back. The man stiffened, then slid off Charles, dead before he hit the dirt.

To the left, Kerpal wrestled on the ground with a painted man, both snarling like street dogs. Charles, half-blind from choking, pulled free his own knife, staggered to his knees, and leapt on them both — his blade found the tribesman's neck and drove deep. Blood gushed. Kerpal pushed the limp body away and sat panting.

Two more still fought, but the guards, now reloaded, lifted their guns again and fired in near unison. One shot hit the chest, the other the head — both bodies dropped.

Silence fell across the field. The grass lay matted, dark with blood. A single spear still quivered in the earth where it had missed its mark.

Charles leaned against a rock, breathing ragged, pressing a hand to his wounded shoulder. Around him, the guards checked each other for wounds. One was dead. The rest alive, barely. Kerpal stood, clothes torn and soaked in blood, eyes scanning the jungle edge. No more came.

"They're gone," he said hoarsely.

“For now,” Charles muttered, spitting red into the dirt. “Bury the bodies. All of them.”

No one argued. They took the shovels and dug a big hole in the poppy feild and threw the bodies inside, then closed it.

Kerpal gently tied the folded cloth around Charles’s wounded shoulder, pulling it tight while Charles grit his teeth, sweat beading at his brow.

“You helped me take revenge for the men who murdered my son,” Kerpal said quietly, his voice thick with meaning. “That means more than anything to me.”

Charles, still catching his breath, nodded. “No problem, brother,” he muttered. “The maggots got what they deserved.”

They stood in silence a moment longer, surrounded by blood-stained grass. Then, wordlessly, the men climbed back on their horses and began the long ride home.

The return journey took twenty days. They rode slower now — not just out of fatigue, but because Charles was fading. Each day his wound worsened. The fever took hold by the fourth day. His head burned, and his eyes were wild with confusion. By the twelfth day, he no longer spoke. By the nineteenth, he barely sat upright in the saddle, leaning limp against the horn.

Just hours from Calcutta, Charles groaned once and slid sideways off his horse, hitting the ground with a dull thud. Kerpal shouted, jumping off his own horse and rushing to him. The other guards dismounted and helped lift Charles’s limp body.

“He’s burning up,” Kerpal said. “But he’s still breathing.”

They slung him back across the horse, holding him upright, and spurred their mounts. The jungle gave way to dusty roads, and by dusk they reached Kerpal’s modest home on the edge of the city. Kerpal’s wife cried out when she saw the pale and bloodied Englishman slump from the saddle.

Kerpal didn’t wait. He ran into the street, shouting for a doctor.

An old man came, leathery hands and thin spectacles, carrying a wooden box with tools and tinctures. He washed the wound, muttering curses in Bengali as he cleaned the festering gash and applied herbs.

“This wound is deep, he has lost a lot of blood” the doctor said, binding it with a fresh cloth. “He’s lucky to be alive.”

“Give him something for the pain,” Kerpal said.

The doctor reached into his box and drew out a small bottle of laudanum. “Opium tincture,” he said. “It will help. But now... we wait.”

Charles lay motionless, his breathing shallow. Kerpal sat at his side as the doctor packed up and left. The guards took posts at the windows.

Hours passed.

Then Charles stirred.

His eyes blinked open, weak and glassy. “Where…” he whispered.

“You’re safe,” Kerpal said softly, raising his head and offering him water. “Drink. You're in my house.”

Charles took a sip, then another. He winced.

Kerpal tipped the laudanum bottle and gave him a 20 drops. The bitterness slid down his throat and began to ease the burning in his shoulder.

“You’ve been unconscious for two days,” Kerpal told him.

Charles swallowed and rasped, “Feels like I fought a damn war.”

“You did,” Kerpal said, half-smiling. “And you won.”

Charles managed a weak grin.

Over the next days, Kerpal’s wife tended to him — bringing rice porridge, wiping his brow, changing the bandages. Children peeked around the corner, eyes wide, whispering to each other in hushed tones.

“Is that the Englishman with the poppies?” one of them whispered.

Charles sometimes waved weakly at them, and they would duck, giggling.

A week passed. He could sit up now, supported by pillows. He sipped the tincture in small doses, keeping the pain dull enough to think. Kerpal visited him each morning, bringing news from the plantation and the city.

“You’ll be back on your feet soon,” he said one morning, handing him a bowl of lentils.

“Don’t rush,” Charles said, voice hoarse. “I’m enjoying the royal treatment.”

They both laughed. The fever had broken. Charles Harker was alive.

Charles recovered slowly. Each day brought a little more strength. He began to walk around Kerpal’s home, his left arm bound tightly in a sling across his chest. The wound throbbed less now, and the fever had broken. After a week, he returned to his own house with Kerpal’s help, moving carefully, breathing shallow.

Weeks passed. Charles rested and sipped laudanum only when needed. Eventually, the bandages came off, and he could move his arm again — stiff at first, but steady enough.

One afternoon, sitting on his veranda, Charles called for Kerpal.

“I want eight good men,” he said. “Fighters. With guns. Paid properly. I want them at the Burma plantation.”

Kerpal nodded. “Eight men. Armed. Understood.”

“And,” Charles continued, “I need one worker — one who knows the whole plantation process. Seed to sap. Someone sharp, someone with sense.”

“I know just the man,” Kerpal said, grinning faintly. “Ravi. He’s worked the fields five years. Smart lad.”

“Good. Bring him and the guards here.”

The next day, Kerpal returned with eight men — lean, dark-skinned, hardened faces — and one broad-shouldered man in a simple cotton shirt.

“This is Ravi,” Kerpal said. “He’s quiet, but he knows the work.”

Charles nodded and stepped out, his arm still wrapped, but no longer bound.

“You,” he said to Ravi, “will run the Burma fields now. These men will keep you safe. I’ve paid for the land. No damn tribesman’s gonna scare us off it. The poppy must grow.”

Ravi stood straight. “Yes, sahib. I will make sure everything is done properly.”

Charles handed Kerpal a small cloth pouch. “Year’s pay for all of them,” he said.

Kerpal weighed it. “Fair sum.”

Charles looked at the men. “Ride now. Take food and tents. Don’t return until the land blooms again.”

Without another word, the group mounted horses and set off. Twenty-six days they rode, reaching the half-abandoned plantation where blood still stained the dirt, now dried and brown. The bodies had been buried, and the jungle had begun creeping back.

But the land was still good.

The men pitched tents and rotated patrols in twos — one watching the trees, the other sleeping. Ravi went to nearby villages and offered coin for laborers.

“Work is simple,” he told them. “Good pay. Good sahib. You just need to be brave and learn the cut.”

A dozen agreed, then more came. Ravi taught them to scratch the pods, gather the sap, dry and knead it. He oversaw the early planting, walking the rows each evening with a ledger in hand.

Back in Patna, Charles leaned on his cane and stared over his primary fields, still healing — but stronger every day.

“Let the jungle come,” he muttered to himself. “We’ll cut it back one harvest at a time.”

Suhani

It was at a gathering in a wealthier quarter of Calcutta — one of those shaded garden parties where traders, clerks, and officers mingled under fans and gin — that Charles first saw her.

Suhani.

She wore a violet sari edged with silver thread, her posture poised, her dark eyes assessing everything with calm intelligence. Unlike the brothel women Charles was used to, Suhani spoke with elegance, precision — and she listened as much as she questioned.

He approached her casually. “You don’t look like you belong among these rum-gutted merchants,” he said, sipping his drink.

She turned to him, arching an eyebrow. “And you don’t look like a man who grew rich trading pepper or pearls.”

Charles chuckled. “No. I grow poppies.”

“Poppies,” she said, voice soft but sharp. “So you’re the one behind all these Englishmen slumped in parlours, dreaming dragons and clouds.”

He smirked. “I prefer to think of myself as… a facilitator of relaxation.”

She smiled thinly. “And the ruination of weaker minds is just a byproduct, I suppose?”

Charles was caught off guard. He liked it.

They spoke for hours, long after the party thinned out. She asked about his trade, about how much a crate sold for in the markets. She knew things — more than she should have. She had once entertained officers in the East India Company, and she’d heard everything from whispers to drunken confessions.

That night, she came with him.

In the candlelight of his Calcutta home, she traced the scar on his shoulder with her finger. “You’ve paid your share in blood,” she murmured.

“And earned it all back in silver,” Charles whispered, pulling her close.

They made love slowly, the heat of India mixing with the sweat of their bodies, her breath soft against his cheek.

In the days that followed, Suhani returned — not with the emptiness of hired lovers, but with questions and presence. They sat together at breakfast while she read Bengali poetry aloud. She corrected his Hindi with amusement. She scolded him for smoking too much Elephant.

One night, lying beside him, she said, “This trade of yours — it will turn. The British will frown on it soon enough. And when that day comes, you’ll need to decide what you are without it.”

Charles stared at the ceiling.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted.

She looked at him.

“Well, find out before someone else writes the ending for you.”

Suhani lay draped in pale gold silk, one arm slung over Charles’s chest like a whisper. Her perfume mingled with the opium smoke curling through the hot air, softening the hard edges of the dimly lit room.

“You must know so many names,” she said, lazily, like the words barely mattered. “Buyers, sellers… all these ports along the southern coast of China. You traders keep half the world running.”

Charles exhaled a long plume from his pipe, watching it spiral. “Names come and go. Ports stay the same.”

She traced a finger along his ribs. “What about the north coast? I’ve heard Quanzhou is ripe. Or was it… Ningbo? You ever send goods that way?”

Charles gave a small shrug. “Once or twice. There’s a man in Ningbo… Zhou Wen. And another in Quanzhou — Huang Bo. Good men. Reliable. And a few more buyers.”

Suhani smiled faintly, her eyes half-lidded. “You must trust them. I’ve heard of men like Huang Shun and Liang Ren too have been buying there lately.”

“As much as a man trusts silver,” Charles said. He kissed her shoulder, careful to let her feel at ease — to believe.

An hour later, she dressed in silence, eyes flicking back toward him once. “You’re not like the others,” she said with a smirk. “Keep your secrets close.”

He didn’t reply. Just lit another pipe and watched her disappear through the curtain.

He waited an hour more before stepping outside into the night air and summoning Arjun and Salim, two of his sharpest men — lean, quiet, precise.

They followed him into the courtyard behind the house where the lanterns flickered.

Arjun grinned. “You want us to move?”

“Tonight,” Charles said. “Split routes — you take Quanzhou, Salim takes Ningbo. Find the buyers Huang Shun and Liang Ren, say you’re bringing the Elephant. We offer sixty-five taels per chest — same as the Company. But half the quantity, twice the quality. Let the smoke speak for itself.”

By sunrise, the two runners were gone, sails rising like wings on the Hooghly, bound for the grey harbors of the South China Sea.

Charles lit a fresh pipe and stood at his window, watching the first light break over Calcutta — thin, gold, and promising.

The runners moved fast.

Arjun took passage aboard a coastal junk out of Chittagong, hugging the shores eastward through stormy stretches and sticky heat. He slept on the deck under a canvas flap, keeping the crate samples close to his chest, never letting them out of reach. Salim, sharper in the tongue and quick with coin, hired a cabin on a crowded merchant brig bound for Amoy. From there, he took a smaller vessel south along the coast to Ningbo, eyes scanning every face, ears tuned to whispers in the tea shops and dockside inns.

They both arrived within days of one another — and wasted none.

Arjun found **Huang Shun** outside Quanzhou’s inner wall, in a courtyard heavy with the smell of camphor and smoke. The man sat cross-legged on a stone bench, watching a servant refill his pipe.

“I bring new wind,” Arjun said in rough Cantonese.

Huang’s eyes narrowed. “Company wind?”

“No,” Arjun replied, setting a wrapped brick gently on the table. “Elephant. The strongest step you’ve tasted.”

Huang took a puff. Then another. He said nothing for a long while — only passed the pipe to his man. Finally, he waved the servant away and said, “The Company sends carts. You send fire. I take fire.”

In Ningbo, Salim found Liang Ren at the back of a gambling house, hunched over a wooden table with four dice and too many debts.

“Too many mouths, not enough smoke,” Liang muttered when Salim laid the Elephant brick before him.

Salim leaned in. “You keep paying for soot. This — this is cloud.”

Liang lit the pipe, exhaled, and smiled like a wolf. “What price?”

“Same as the Company. Sixty-five taels. But cleaner. Stronger. You take ten, next month fifteen. Then more.”

Liang Ren slapped the table. “Done. The old bastards grow soft. Let the Company drown in its own tar.”

The runners stayed two days — long enough to seal the deals, receive the advance silver, and pass word of delivery times. Then they slipped out before questions could be asked, shadows in the morning fog.

Three weeks later, they stood again in Charles’s home in Calcutta.

“They’ve switched,” Arjun said, tossing a cloth bag of silver onto the table. “Company's locked out.”

Charles took a slow draw from his pipe, then smiled.

“Well,” he said. “Then the Elephant has learned to trample.”

Suhani returned two nights later, slipping into the house after dusk as if nothing had shifted between them. The guards let her through without question. Charles was waiting, seated near the window, lamp low. She smiled when she saw him, the same practiced curve of the mouth, and crossed the room without speaking. They undressed each other in silence, their bodies knowing the steps even if their minds did not. When it was done, she lay on her side, one knee drawn up, watching the slow roll of smoke above them.

She laughed softly. “Five thousand sterling. That’s what I want.”

He looked at her, expression flat. “For what?”

“For my silence,” she said easily. “I can walk into a Company office tomorrow and speak names. Routes. Who sells to whom. Who replaces whom. You know what that does to a man like you.”

Charles set the pipe down. “I don’t look kindly to extortion.”

Her smile hardened. “Then you won’t like what comes next.” She stood, pulling her sari back into place. “I’ve already spoken to them. You’ve lost your trade. By the time your runners land, they’ll be turned away.”

Charles rose slowly. “You don`t say?”

She adjusted an earring, avoiding his eyes. “Maybe. Maybe not. That’s the beauty of it.” She moved toward the door. “You should have paid.”

“You overestimated yourself,” he said.

She paused at the threshold and glanced back. “And you underestimated me.”

She left without another word.

Charles didn’t follow. He turned instead toward the hallway where one of the guards stood waiting, hands folded, eyes forward.

“Go after her,” Charles said. “You know what to do.”

The guard nodded once and slipped out into the night.

The guard followed Suhani in a dark alley. He walked over to her from behind, his hand clamped over her mouth, his other arm a steel band around her waist as he dragged her behind a wooden fence. A sharp, metallic glint was the only warning before a searing, white-hot pain erupted in her side. Her eyes flew wide in disbelief, a choked gasp muffled against his palm. He twisted the blade, a brutal, intimate act, and her body arched against him in a convulsive shudder. The strength drained from her legs in a sudden rush, and he let her slump to the grimy cobblestones. She lay there, a gurgling rasp escaping her lips as a warm, sticky wetness bloomed across her dress. Her gaze fixed on a distant shard of moonlight, the fight leaving her eyes as they slowly glazed over, the alley's silence swallowing her final, shuddering breath.

The lamp guttered. Charles poured himself a drink he didn’t finish. Somewhere outside, a dog barked once, then went quiet.

The guard returned sometime soon. There was a dark smear along his sleeve. He stood straight.

“It is done,” he said.

Charles nodded, as if acknowledging a delivery. He picked up the pipe again and lit it, watching the ember glow.

Outside, the street swallowed the sound of footsteps, and the house settled back into its careful silence.

Calcutta, Late 1816

Charles Harker sat beneath the wide fan of a rattan ceiling fan in his study, swirling a glass of arrack. The plantation books lay open before him, neat columns of figures rising with every shipment. But money alone wasn't enough — not anymore. The Company had eyes. And after Suhani's betrayal, he would have more.

"Time we bought our own eyes," he muttered.

He sent Jamil — one of his quietest men, a former warehouse porter — to sniff around the Company's lower offices. Jamil posed as a rice merchant, buying drinks at taverns where junior clerks and shipping aides gathered after dusk. In the right haze of smoke and liquor, tongues loosened.

At first, it was only drips.

One night, Jamil returned to the house with a folded note and a sly grin.

"A dock scribe, sahib," he said. "He tells me six opium shipments leave in the next ten days. One goes east, the others south. He wants a rupee per name."

Charles nodded. "Pay him five. And tell him there's more if he gets me the overseers' names."

"Already done," Jamil replied.

Weeks passed, and coins changed hands like whispers. Small men with narrow jobs began feeding scraps — logs, receipts, loose lips at counting tables. Names surfaced. A shipment in Bhagalpur, overseer Reynolds. A caravan bound for Bombay, guarded by Company sepoys.

Charles marked it all down.

One foggy morning, Jamil returned again — this time with a serious face.

"There's a man," he said, "in the ledgers office. An accountant. Quiet. Greedy. Wants protection more than gold."

"What's his name?"

"Thomas Grier."

Charles nodded. “Bring him to me. Tonight.”

That evening, Grier arrived — thin, pale, twitchy. He sat across from Charles, hands pressed nervously against his knees.

Charles poured him a drink. “You work in the main books?”

Grier nodded. “Ledgers from Bihar, some Bengal... I see the tallies. Who grows. Who ships.”

“And?”

Grier looked around, voice low. “They move nearly five thousand chests a year now. Poppy’s everywhere. Most go through Patna and Ghazipur, same buyers, same carts. But... prices are dropping. Too much supply.”

“Buyers will look for better,” Charles said smoothly. “And I’m offering them.”

“I figured. That’s why I came.”

Charles leaned forward, voice calm and dangerous. “You bring me names of new buyers, Company changes, overseer movements, even a change in crop load — and I make you wealthy. But if you ever lie to me, Mr. Grier, or double-play with the Company... I’ll make sure the Hooghly swallows you quiet.”

Grier swallowed hard. “Understood.”

Charles smiled, poured him another glass.

“Welcome to the other side of the fence.”

Weeks turned into months. Grier’s reports came in steadily — disguised in merchant orders and tea invoices. Company plantations, names of foreign traders, bribe records, quiet dismissals, even rumors of a planned tariff adjustment.

Charles now knew the Company’s moves before some of their own officers did.

And he knew: the war wasn’t just fought with ships and guns.

It was ledger versus ledger — and his ink was sharper.

Charles Harker leaned over the balcony of his two-storey house, watching the smoky city below. The scent of fried spices mingled with the distant murmur of ox carts and hawkers. In the east, the sky glowed amber. Another harvest cycle was nearing.

He lit his pipe and drew deep. *Elephant* curled in his lungs like a sleeping god.

He knew the truth by now: he would never outmatch the Company in volume. They ran the caravans and brigs, the bonded warehouses and forts. Their opium moved like rivers — but it was mostly mud.

“They sell by the ocean,” Charles muttered. “I sell by the drop. But mine burns clean.”

Where the Company flooded markets with lower-grade product, Charles focused on the smaller, sharper cuts — lists of names, hundreds now, soon to be thousands. Buyers who had grown tired of weak brick and watered sap. Clients who would rather pay for clean fire than a dull haze.

He didn’t need mass trade. He needed consistency.

And that, he now had.

In the last year, Charles had purchased three new tracts of land across Bengal and Patna district — unassuming fields with good soil and easy access to water. He sent trusted men to oversee each site — men who had risen from the ranks, toiled in the fields, seen the bricks dry in the sun and carried them with pride.

Now, each site had its own rhythm, its own overseer, and its own troop of guards.

Kerpal’s sons helped with hiring — laborers were plentiful, cheap, and replaceable.

The plantations grew. So did the crates.

From 200 to 300 a year.

Sixty thousand sterling, clean.

Charles had stopped counting the exact figures. He only watched the ledgers rise — and his shadow along with them.

The local political scene, once hostile, began to bend.

The first magistrate to object received a quiet visit. The second was given an envelope — thick and unmarked. The third received a shipment of rare French wine and a quiet promise of continued support for his campaign.

Soon, Charles had five politicians in his pocket. Enough to sway inspections, delay inquiries, and turn blind eyes at port.

One of them, a Bengali councilor with a fondness for chess, visited often.

“I must admit, Mr. Harker,” the man said one afternoon, sipping tea on Charles’s veranda, “we were skeptical of you at first.”

“Of course,” Charles said, smiling. “White man with money usually brings trouble.”

The councilor laughed. “But you’ve kept the laborers fed. You don’t steal water. And your crates make more men rich than just yourself.”

“Rich men make good neighbors,” Charles said.

The man raised his cup. “Then may your fields bloom.”

By now, Charles had everything he needed — land, labor, protection, buyers, and a whisper network that reached from Burma to Quanzhou.

He had become a rival not in size — but in quality, speed, and discretion.

And in a world drowning in poppy sap, *clean fire* was king.

Calcutta, Late 1817

The whispers came first.

A scribe murdered outside the offices of *Samachar Darpan*, a Bengali-language newspaper aligned with reformist voices. Then a police raid on a warehouse in Kidderpore — not opium, this time, but pamphlets. Leaflets in Hindi and Urdu, calling for taxation reforms, better treatment of native workers, and quiet hints at self-rule.

And then the sudden silencing of two prominent journalists.

Charles heard it in pieces — from clerks he paid, porters with loose tongues, and Company men who drank too much when their conscience stirred.

It wasn’t just opium anymore.

It was *control*.

The East India Company, jittery after the Vellore mutiny of 1806 and haunted by distant revolts, had begun a shadow campaign to clamp down on dissent. Anything printed, anything spoken in meetings — it all had to be Company-approved. Even loyal traders were now being watched.

And Charles Harker, despite his bribes and political cover, was too independent for their liking.

One evening, as he sat smoking on his garden bench, Kerpal arrived.

“There was a man asking questions,” Kerpal said. “White coat, from Fort William. He came to the harbor asking who handles private cargo. Not naming names, but…”

Charles exhaled, the opium sweet and bitter on his tongue. “Not about us?”

“Not directly,” Kerpal said. “But these men… they’re casting nets.”

Charles nodded. The Company didn’t accuse — they observed. Watched. Waited.

Then punished.

Days later, a letter arrived at Charles’s residence.

Cream paper, stiff. Wax seal of the Company. No return name.

It was an invitation — or rather, a summons — to meet with Captain Reginald Vane, a liaison officer between the Bengal Presidency and the Home Department.

Charles read it twice, then handed it to Kerpal. “Well. Looks like we’ve been noticed.”

“You going?”

“I’d be foolish not to.”

Fort William loomed grey and precise, its stone face as unforgiving as the British Crown itself.

Captain Vane was tall, gaunt, with pale hair and cold eyes. He offered no pleasantries, only motioned for Charles to sit.

“You’ve made quite the name for yourself,” Vane said.

“I sell bricks and ship them across sea,” Charles replied. “I’m not a general or a priest.”

“No,” Vane said slowly. “But you’re close with the docks. And close with the tongues who whisper into ink.”

Charles leaned back. “I hear stories, nothing more.”

Vane tapped his fingers on the desk. “I don’t care what you sell, Mr. Harker. But I do care where your ears are — and where your loyalties fall.”

Charles said nothing.

Vane leaned forward. “There’s a movement growing. Not yet a rebellion — but it could become one. These vernacular newspapers stir minds. Traders like you? You carry messages with your cargo. Letters. Ledgers. Names.”

“I don’t meddle in politics,” Charles said flatly.

Vane studied him. “Then prove it. Help us… sort the useful voices from the dangerous ones. Quietly.”

Charles held his gaze. He saw what Vane was offering — protection. Immunity. Maybe even influence. And one day, when the time was right, perhaps… a door in London.

He nodded slowly. “If I hear anything,” he said, “you’ll be the first to know.”

Vane smiled thinly. “See that I am.”

That night, Charles returned home and locked his study door.

He poured a glass of brandy, untouched. Then, calmly, he began burning half his records.

Some truths were too dangerous to keep. Others… would soon be rewritten.

The city was restless.

Pamphlets appeared again — this time nailed to market stalls and mosque doors. The Bengali paper *Sambad Kaumudi*, newly founded, printed columns questioning the Company’s education policies and missionary involvement. Charles read the translation one morning over tea. It was bold.

“They’ve stopped hiding,” Kerpal said, setting down the newspaper. “Sooner or later, someone will bleed for this.”

Charles folded the paper carefully. “Someone always does.”

He had begun playing a double game — just as Captain Vane had wanted.

Through a few careful intermediaries, Charles began supplying the Captain’s office with discreet “shipping inconsistencies.” Names of traders smuggling in leaflets with cloth shipments. Quiet rumors of pamphlet printers hiding in Chandernagore. Nothing that threatened his own business. Just enough to prove usefulness.

Vane sent no letters. Only silence — and that was the reward. The unspoken pact held.

But Charles wasn’t blind.

He knew Vane and the Company used this moment not just to silence dissent — but to clear the field of competitors. Independent traders, rising merchants — all threats to their monopoly. Charles walked a knife’s edge.

Then came the mistake.

A man named Govind Menon, an upstart textile trader, was arrested — supposedly for smuggling banned publications. His warehouse was raided. His family fled the city. But Charles knew the truth.

Menon hadn’t been printing anything.

He'd just grown too successful — too Indian.

And worse, Charles had spoken to him a week earlier about sharing shipping routes.

Charles stared into his evening glass of port, weighing the moment.

A week later, Charles made a quiet trip to the outskirts of the city.

In a modest house by the Hooghly River lived Andrew Hale, a British official in disgrace — once a clerk in the Company's Political Department, now half-forgotten, buried under debt and scandal for having spoken too freely against censorship policies. A man with no loyalty left to the Company.

Charles brought gold, wine, and a proposition.

"I can't go back to London," Hale said bitterly. "Not unless I want to be laughed out of every club and chased by creditors."

"You will," Charles said. "Eventually. If you help me."

"What do you want?"

"Letters," Charles said. "Accounts. Shipping quotas. Minutes from meetings. Anything that tells me what the Company plans — especially in Bengal and Canton."

Hale narrowed his eyes. "And in return?"

"A path back," Charles said. "I have friends in ports you can't spell, and men who'll clear your debts by the time you finish your drink."

Hale drank deep.

Then he laughed. "You're worse than the Company, Mr. Harker."

Charles smiled. "Better."

From that day forward, Hale became the shadow behind Charles's curtain.

Together, they began forging Company manifests — altering cargo numbers, shifting delivery reports, and rerouting informants' letters. Every forgery opened new space for Charles's own trade, gave plausible deniability, and kept his name off the Company's suspicion lists.

As Charles walked the line between smuggler and shadow-diplomat, he began seeing something else: the Company was no longer invincible.

It was heavy, bloated with power, blind in some corners.

And he — Charles Harker — had learned how to slip through its cracks.

The storm finally broke in July, 1818.

A scandal leaked from Fort William — a cache of intercepted letters, misfiled reports, and inexplicable gaps in the Company's shipping records. Whispers began to circle through drawing rooms and government halls: *"There's a traitor in the office."*

Captain Vane summoned Charles without warning.

They met in a quiet back salon of a private club on Chowringhee Road. Vane stood near the shuttered window, sipping brandy, his uniform crisp as always.

"You've been busy," Vane said without turning.

"I manage a few ledgers," Charles replied coolly.

"The scandal is contained — barely. But there's talk. Someone's tampered with Company cargo manifests. Shipments to Canton misrecorded. Some officers think it's sabotage." Vane turned now, his gaze cold. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Charles didn't blink. "Only what I've heard over a pipe and polite company. Seems the Company has a leak."

Vane studied him. "If I find out you were part of this—"

"You won't," Charles said smoothly. "Because I've been feeding your office leads for over a year. I handed you the Chandernagore pamphleteers. Gave you the rogue printers near Bhagalpur. I've earned my protection."

Vane swirled the drink in his hand. "And if I were to forget that?"

Charles placed a small envelope on the table. Inside: names, dates, an internal Company memo falsified by Hale — implicating another official in Calcutta as the source of the leak.

"You could burn me," Charles said. "Or use this and save your own position. One of us walks away cleaner."

Vane picked up the envelope, weighed it silently. Then he smiled.

"Perhaps you're not the snake we feared, Harker."

"No," Charles said, rising. "Just the man who learned from them."

Later that year, Vane was promoted quietly to a post in Madras — his record spotless. Hale's letters made their way into the right hands in London, and soon, murmurs began of reinstatement. A new reputation for "cooperation."

And Charles?

Charles had secured something better than money: safety.

A new alias was registered under Calcutta shipping logs — “H & Sons Trading Co.,” a ghost name behind which he could work. The Elephant brand quietly returned to Ningbo, Quanzhou, and now even Amoy.

His fortune swelled. He bought a small printing press to publish neutral papers and started funding a charitable clinic to treat opium addicts — purely for optics. British whispers labeled him “eccentric, but loyal.” Local rulers saw him as “untouchable.”

Kerpal called it luck.

Charles called it insurance.

One night, smoking on his veranda, Charles turned to Kerpal and said:

“I think one day I’ll return to London.”

Kerpal raised a brow. “What for?”

“Reputation. A man like me has no place in India forever. I’ll build something there. High walls. Silver plates. No one will ask how I paid for them.”

Kerpal nodded. “And the Elephant?”

Charles smiled, looking out over the dark garden.

“You will ride it from now on.”

Kerpal blinked, processing. “You trust me with it?”

Charles nodded. “There’s no one else I would. You know every inch of it. The plantations, the buyers, the books. And I’m not leaving you empty-handed.”

He reached into his coat and pulled out a small folded slip — a contract drafted in precise English and Hindustani script.

“You’ll take twenty percent of all yearly sales. That’s over twelve thousand sterling at current levels — enough to make you wealthier than any magistrate. But it means the business must do well. You’ll handle everything here: buyer negotiations, shipping, payments, and keeping the books clean.”

Kerpal stared at the slip, then back at Charles. “And you?”

“I’ll take the checks in London, cash them under the firm. I’ll visit Calcutta in every few years — quietly. Just to walk the ground, speak with the men, check that no one’s gone soft.”

Kerpal smiled, the lines on his face deepening. “And letters?”

“Every week,” Charles said. “I want a full report by post. Names, weights, numbers. Use cipher for anything sensitive. If something burns down, I want to smell the smoke from London.”

Kerpal looked away for a moment, as if taking it all in, then said softly, “You’ve given me a life, Charles. A good one. I’ll protect this.”

Charles leaned back in his chair and exhaled.

“I know you will. That’s why I’m handing it to you.”

A silence passed between them. Then Kerpal stood, walked to the edge of the veranda, and looked out toward the fading sun.

“I’ll send the first letter at your arrival,” he said. “The ships will keep moving. The Elephant still has a long memory.”

Charles smirked. “Let’s keep it that way.”

They sat in silence, watching dusk settle over the city — two men, once gutter-deep in sweat and dust, now dividing an empire built on poppy and smoke.

London, 1820

Charles stood on the raised earth ridge of one of his plantations, the sun casting long shadows over the poppy fields. The heads were green and full — next season would be ripe again.

He walked the perimeter slowly with each of the three overseers: Lakhan, Abdul, and Harish — men hardened by heat, season, and sweat.

“You’ve been chosen because you know the land,” Charles said, looking each one in the eye. “The roots, the men, the yield. You don’t answer to bribes, and you don’t run. From now on, the land is yours to command. You’ll report only to Kerpal. No one else.”

The men nodded.

“If anyone gets clever — cuts short the resin, hides weight, or bleeds sacks dry — I’ll hear about it. And when I visit, I’ll check. Personally.”

“Understood, sahib,” Lakhan said. “Your word is our law.”

Charles nodded once, then walked away from the fields for the last time.

Inside the white-columned lobby, cool and echoing with quiet conversation and the scratching of pens, Charles approached the clerk.

“I’m closing the account,” he said. “Six hundred thousand sterling. I want it in gold.”

The young clerk looked up, startled. “S-Sir… gold?”

Charles leaned in slightly. “You heard me. Not all at once. Have it secured and sent by Company convoy. One month. Delivered to London, to the Bank of England. Marked for Charles Harker. I’ll have documents arranged on both ends.”

The clerk fumbled for his inkwell. “Yes, sir. Of course. It will be done.”

Charles gave him a thin smile and walked out without another word.

He stood in the hallway of his rented villa, now stripped of its silks and rugs. The scent of pipe smoke still lingered in the beams.

Kerpal stood with him by the door, arms crossed, eyes distant.

“This house saw a great deal,” Charles said.

Kerpal smiled faintly. “It saw a man rise.”

They clasped hands — not as master and servant, but as brothers.

“I’ll keep the fire burning,” Kerpal said.

“And I’ll send letters. Use the code.”

“You’ll be missed.”

Charles lit one last pipe. “Let’s hope not too loudly.”

The ship Windfall departed Calcutta port in the second week of January, 1820. The journey was long — three and a half months — slow-sailing through the monsoon-battered Bay of Bengal, curling round the Cape of Good Hope, then north into the chill waters of the Atlantic.

Charles stood often alone on the deck, pipe in hand, staring into grey-blue distance.

He thought of the blood spilled on Burmese soil. Of Arthur’s broken body. Of Kerpal’s steady loyalty. And of the gold — already halfway across the oceans.

The fog rolled low and thick, as Charles stepped off the gangplank.

The air smelled of coal smoke, fish, and damp stone.

He looked around slowly, boots firm on wood that once echoed under his bare feet.

Twenty years.

Dockhands shouted, carts rumbled, gulls screamed. The city had grown — but the filth, the hunger, the grime were unchanged.

He climbed into a black-lacquered carriage waiting by the quay.

The driver turned. “Where to, sir?”

Charles didn’t hesitate. “To Soho.”

The carriage rattled off through the maze of alleys, cobbles, and lamps.

Charles checked into a quiet hotel on a side street off Dean Street — red drapes, faded carpets, a fireplace that smoked more than it warmed.

He sat at the window that night, sipping a glass of claret and watching gaslights flicker in the fog.

The gold would arrive within weeks. He had time.

The great stone lion of London’s banking heart loomed over the street as Charles stepped through its towering doors. Inside, it was hushed and vast, the walls echoing with whispers of money and power.

A clerk approached. “Yes, sir? How may we assist you?”

Charles reached into his coat and produced the letter with the Bank of Hindostan seal, carefully waxed and intact.

“I’m opening an account,” he said. “Name’s Charles Harker. I’m expecting a shipment from the Bank of Hindostan — six hundred thousand sterling, in gold. Due within the month. You’ll find the transfer authorisation attached.”

The clerk blinked. “Six… hundred…”

Charles simply raised an eyebrow.

“Of course, sir,” the man said quickly. “We’ll prepare the vault and necessary paperwork immediately.”

An hour later, he signed the final document in thick black ink, the Bank's senior treasurer adding a confirming signature beneath.

“Everything is in order, Mr. Harker,” the treasurer said. “We’ll notify you upon arrival of the funds.”

Charles stood. “You’ll be seeing a lot of me.”

Back in his room, Charles removed his coat and set it over the chair. The fire crackled low, painting shadows on the walls. From a carved wooden box he'd kept close on his travels, he removed a ball of opium wrapped in oil paper. The rich scent filled the room at once — earthy, sweet, intoxicating.

He sat by the hearth, unwrapped his ivory pipe, packed it slowly and with care. He lit it, inhaled.

Smoke curled like silk into the air.

He stared at it, at how it danced upward in lazy spirals. For a moment, he saw the fields of Patna, the wide jungles of Burma, the flickering lamp in Liang Wu's smoke-filled den, Arthur laughing in a haze. And Kerpal, quiet and loyal, standing by his side through every fire.

He exhaled.

A knock at the door.

"Enter."

A young room servant stepped in, bowing. "Mr. Harker, do you require anything else tonight?"

Charles leaned back, voice heavy with satisfaction. "Bring me everything good you've got. Roast, bread, sweet puddings, whatever the chef would serve a king. And wine — real claret. None of that piss from the barrel."

The boy blinked, then grinned. "Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

As the door shut again, Charles smiled faintly.

He was forty now.

Twenty years of India behind him. A new empire ahead.

And tonight, London was feeding him.

The streets of Soho were wet with morning rain, the stones glistening under bootheels and carriage wheels. Charles sat by his hotel window, swirling a glass of claret, when a knock came.

A young room service boy stood outside his door, hat in hand.

"A message for you, sir."

Charles took the sealed envelope, wax stamped with the crest of the Bank of England.

He opened it, eyes scanning the contents.

“We are pleased to inform you that your consignment from the Bank of Hindostan has arrived and has been secured in your account. Weight: 10,714 troy ounces of fine gold, valued at £600,000 sterling…”

He folded the letter slowly, tucked it into his coat pocket, and stood.

“Boy,” he said, fixing his cuffs, “have them ready a carriage. I’ve a meeting with my future.”

The bell above the door chimed as Charles stepped inside. A short man with thinning hair and a neat cravat rose quickly.

“Good day, sir! William Atherton, property agent. How may I assist?”

“I want to see properties in Soho,” Charles said. “One for business — a club for gentlemen. And one for living. Quiet, discreet, well-kept.”

Atherton beamed. “Say no more. Right this way.”

They spent the better part of the afternoon walking the wet streets. First a stately townhouse near Dean Street — too narrow. Then a grand building near Old Compton — too crowded. Finally, they stood before a handsome stone building with tall windows, deep mahogany doors, and gas lamps fixed to the façade.

“This,” Atherton said, “is known as York House. Formerly a merchant lodge, two floors, private courtyard in the back, plenty of space inside for a hall, parlour, smoking rooms, even gaming tables.”

Charles nodded slowly. “I’ll take it.”

Atherton blinked. “You wish to—? Sir, we’ve not even—”

Charles took out his checkbook and ink pen. “The price?”

“Ah… six thousand pounds, sir.”

Charles scribbled, tore the cheque free, and handed it to him.

Atherton stared. “I… yes, sir. Certainly, sir. A pleasure, sir.”

“Now show me a living apartment. Close by.”

They walked a short distance to a quieter street where a three-storey Georgian row house stood with wrought-iron railings and a small garden.

“This one has a private entrance, three fireplaces, and a second-floor drawing room. Built in ’89, sound walls, little foot traffic.”

Charles stepped inside, glanced at the ceiling height, the plasterwork, the dark wood floors.

“This too. What’s the sum?”

“Two thousand, two hundred, sir.”

Another cheque was written.

Atherton took it as if it were a holy relic. “Would you like me to arrange furnishing, sir?”

“I want both places luxuriously furnished. Walnut, velvet, brass, rugs from the East, carved tables, mirrors. No clutter — tasteful. Send the best man you’ve got for interior work.”

“Of course, sir. I shall begin immediately.”

Charles extended his hand. Atherton shook it eagerly.

“One more thing,” Charles said, fixing him with a cool stare. “Discretion. I don’t entertain gossip.”

Atherton’s smile tightened. “Naturally, sir. My lips are as sealed as a banker’s vault.”

By dusk, Charles stood outside the future home of his club, watching the lamplighter strike the gas lamps to life. The streets glowed amber. The mist had returned.

He lit his pipe, packed with Elephant, and drew in slow satisfaction.

The rain had softened into a grey drizzle when Charles finally stepped out of the hotel for the last time.

After six weeks of meticulous work — velvet drapes hung, brass chandeliers installed, Eastern carpets laid thick over hardwood floors — both his new home and the gentlemen’s club stood ready. Tasteful. Discreet. Rich, but not loud. The kind of place where power whispered instead of roared.

He moved into the house quietly. Two Indian servants from Calcutta, already trained in his preferences, arrived to manage the household. He hired an English maid for appearance, and an elderly but sharp-eyed butler named Finch to stand at the door and answer with the right tone of deference.

At the club, he set about the next task. A tall, former navy man named Carter was hired as the doorman and chief of security — strong, quiet, and completely loyal after a short but convincing conversation about payment and discretion. A French cook took over the kitchen. Two waitresses were hired — young, well-mannered, and not too curious.

Each week, letters from Kerpal arrived — folded crisply, written in his neat script. Harvests were healthy. Overseers were doing their job. Gold was flowing.

Charles sat one evening in his study — a dark-paneled room with tall bookshelves, a roaring fireplace, and a great mahogany desk that smelled of polish. The ink bottle was open, the pen wet with intent.

He began to write in firm strokes:

To: Kerpal
Patna District
Bengal Presidency

From: Charles Harker
Golden Elephant Club
Soho, London

Kerpal,

The time has come to feed the lion.

With your next shipment, I require ten crates — packed as agreed, marked only with the symbol. Deliver to the address above. Keep the port in Portsmouth or Plymouth. Whichever is safest. I trust your judgment.

You've done well. London will know the Elephant soon.

Yours,
C.H.

He folded the letter, sealed it with black wax, and called for his man.

"Finch," Charles said, handing him the envelope. "See this is posted tonight. No delay."

"Yes, sir," Finch replied, bowing slightly before vanishing down the hallway.

Charles sat back, stretching his legs. He lit his pipe — and drew in a long curl of smoke.

Outside, London slept beneath a shroud of fog and lamp-glow.

Inside, Charles Harker smiled.

The Elephant was coming.

The lamp-lit haze of Soho clung to Charles's coat as he stepped out into the autumn night, carriage wheels splashing through shallow puddles. The fog smelled faintly of horse piss and coal smoke — but in the heart of London, business was beginning to breathe.

Charles spent a week moving through the city's theatres, cabarets, and gin halls, finding the right women — sharp-eyed, charming, and used to the company of men with means. He offered each of them a wage twice what they made dancing or lounging on rich men's laps.

“Full house every night,” he promised one in a powder-blue wig backstage at the Haymarket. “Better food. Better clients. And you’ll keep what they give you.”

She cocked her head. “Private work too?”

“If the price is right,” Charles said, eyes steady. “But no violence. My place, my rules.”

By the end of the second week, he had twelve women on the Golden Elephant’s roster.

The shipment of Elephant opium arrived quietly through Portsmouth — ten crates hidden in a shipment of Chinese porcelain. Charles sent his most trusted man to oversee the transport into the city. Two covered wagons rolled through fog and cobbled streets until they reached the discreet rear entrance of the Golden Elephant.

He kept the crates in a back room, locked and guarded.

That same evening, Charles handed the girls bundles of pamphlets printed in gold script:

“The Golden Elephant: A Gentlemen’s House of Smoke, Silk, and Serenity.”

He gave instructions clear and simple: “Only the well-dressed. Those who smell of coin. No pamphlets for the gutter crowd.”

By week's end, the velvet-curtained club was warm with laughter and whispers. Whiskey poured like honey, billiard balls clacked against green felt, and the Elephant smoke curled in glass pipes beneath low amber lights. Customers sank into armchairs, lips slack, dreams vivid. Some came alone. Others in pairs. Always men with rings, cravats, and the weary look of inheritance.

Ten men smoked there by week’s end. By the next, twenty.

Outside, his bouncers — tall and granite-eyed — turned away anyone with mud on their boots or too many teeth missing.

But Charles had plans for them too.

Within the month, he bought three dilapidated houses — one in Whitechapel, two in Docklands — and turned them into smoke dens for the poor. The interiors were dark, reeking of burnt resin and sweat. But the Elephant flowed there too — smaller doses, cheaper pipes, straw mats instead of velvet chairs.

"Let them all dream," Charles murmured to himself one night as he stood on the second floor of the Golden Elephant, watching a room of dazed patrons melt into the cushions. "One pays with silver, the other with copper. But in the end, the coin smells the same."

Morning broke gray over London, a wet light seeping in through the fog-drenched windows of Soho. But the Golden Elephant never opened its doors before the shadows grew long. It was a house of dusk and decadence, and Charles Harker liked it that way.

By late afternoon, servants lit the gas lamps, their flames licking to life with a soft pop and hiss. The velvet curtains were drawn. Scented oils were heated on small brass burners — sandalwood and cinnamon to mask the more pungent notes of resin and smoke. Tables were polished, the billiard balls chalked, and the girls took turns with powder and rouge in their upstairs quarters.

Downstairs, Charles stood at the polished bar, a tulip glass of brandy in hand, watching it all unfold with a faint nod of satisfaction. This was no dockside den. This was velvet, brass, gold, and control.

By seven, the club opened. A pair of uniformed doormen flanked the entrance — tall men with cropped beards and short iron rods at their hips. Only the dressed and clean passed through: men in top hats, silk scarves, ivory canes, and the slow, stiff gait of wealth.

"Evening, Mr. Hollings," Charles greeted one, a shipping magnate who visited every Saturday like church. “Your room is ready.”

"Excellent," Hollings nodded. “Is Marie working tonight?”

"She is. And she saved your pipe.”

Inside, the club purred with low laughter, glasses clinking. The opium pipes were warmed in their silver trays, and the Elephant — dark, sticky, potent — was rolled, pressed, and prepared by the staff in the back. Each client had their own pipe, their own blend — some with tobacco, some pure. A gold-banded pipe for regulars, bone for first-timers.

In the back room, Room Six, two Members of Parliament lay side-by-side on chaise lounges, eyes half-lidded as smoke curled above them. One murmured about India. The other laughed and whispered something about Turkish girls.

In Room Three, a well-known author whispered story ideas to a cabaret girl with emerald earrings. “In the smoke, I see entire cities,” he slurred. “You ever been to Damascus?”

She only smiled and fed him another draw from the pipe.

At the bar, Charles signed the evening’s ledger and counted the evening’s gains. The club earned well — opium, drink, company, privacy — all of it sold under gold chandeliers. No chaos. No rowdiness. This was leisure tailored for power.

Upstairs, in his study, a letter waited on his desk — the familiar seal of Kerpal, sent weekly from Calcutta.

Charles sat in the high-backed leather chair and cracked it open. *Crop looking good this season. The overseers report steady hands and weather holding. Expect thirty more crates than last year. Guards reported no trouble on the roads. Govind has left for Canton yesterday with half shipment — Liang Wu still paying on time. Sending your gold come March, same channel.*

Beneath it, the handwriting shifted: *Your house here is well cared for. My wife sends you pickled mangoes. Do not forget us in your luxury.*

Charles smiled faintly, reached for his pen, and wrote a brief reply.

When he was done, he called for his runner.

“Have this sent to Calcutta. Tell the port clerk to expect another letter soon — we’ll need forty more crates next shipment. Send it to Portland Dock again.”

The runner nodded and vanished into the night.

Back in the lounge, the music picked up — a violin humming through candlelit smoke.

It was a quiet Tuesday evening at the Golden Elephant when the visitor arrived — unexpected, unscheduled, but dressed in the kind of confidence that opened doors without knocking.

Charles was in the lounge, glass in hand, overseeing the night’s rhythm — the lighting was soft, the smoke thick, the girls in full charm. That’s when Reginald Vane appeared, stepping past the doormen without pause, his black cane tapping lightly on the marble.

Charles’s eyes narrowed at the familiar face.

Vane was no ordinary bureaucrat. A senior attaché in the India Office, close to the Crown’s men. A man who’d spent years helping Charles silence inconvenient files, redirect unwanted eyes. A man who’d once said "Your success, Charles, reflects on mine — and I do like to look good."

But tonight, his smile was thin.

“Mr. Vane,” Charles said, motioning toward a quiet corner. “Didn’t expect you. Drink?”

“No,” Vane said curtly. “Not tonight.”

Charles raised a brow. “Then I assume this isn’t a social call.”

“It’s not.” Vane leaned in, his voice low. “There’s talk at the Board of Control. Too much noise from Canton. Company’s traders are bleeding, and some curious minds have started wondering why.”

Charles remained still, only the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth.

“You’ve kept your operation neat,” Vane continued. “But success — real success — always leaves a trail. And it’s being followed. Names have come up. Liang Wu. Kerpal. A certain type of branded opium… with an elephant.”

Charles said nothing, his pipe resting cold in the tray beside him.

“Now,” Vane went on, “I don’t care. Frankly, I admire your audacity. But I need to know — is it still controlled? Or are you slipping?”

“I haven’t slipped in twenty years,” Charles said evenly. “And I won’t start now.”

Vane nodded. “Then here’s what you need to do. Slow the shipments. A few months of silence. Let the Company think you’ve moved on, maybe retired rich. Keep the club. Keep the show. But pull back the shadow.”

Charles narrowed his eyes. “And if I don’t?”

Vane smiled, finally, cold and clean. “Then I can’t stop the inquiry. And you know how inquiries go. They reach back decades. Even to Calcutta.”

A long silence stretched between them.

Finally, Charles said, “What do you want for the warning?”

Vane stood, smoothing his coat. “Nothing now. Just obedience. And the promise that, if I come again, it’ll be for a drink — not a warning.”

He turned and left, cane tapping rhythmically across the floorboards.

Charles sat for a moment, unmoving, staring into the flicker of the gaslight.

Then he turned to his nearest man. “Fetch Salim. Tell him to burn all the records from the Canton runs. Tonight.”

“And the crates at the docks?” the man asked.

“Store them. Quietly. We wait.”

Outside, the fog rolled through Soho like a silent tide, swallowing secrets by the hour.

It was a fogged-in Thursday when the trouble began. The Golden Elephant glowed warm in the grey, drawing its usual stream of the powdered, perfumed, and perfumed-with-money clientele.

Charles sat in the back salon, sipping port and reviewing the week's numbers when a sudden crash echoed through the floorboards — a table overturned. A scream followed.

A moment later, Lucia — one of the cabaret girls — burst into the hallway, her makeup smeared, lip bleeding. “He’s gone mad!” she gasped, grabbing the wall for balance. “He hit me!”

Charles rose like a thundercloud, straightening his waistcoat. Two of his doormen were already moving, but he pushed past them.

The smoking lounge was a mess. A chair lay broken, opium ash scattered. And in the center stood Lord Henry Elbridge, a red-faced MP from Surrey — a man with a known temper and too many secrets. He stood swaying, shirt half-untucked, eyes glassy with Elephant smoke and pride.

“She spat on me!” he slurred.

Lucia cowered near the door, wiping blood from her mouth. “He tried to force himself on me. When I said no…”

Charles stepped forward, voice low and cold. “Lord Elbridge. You are in *my* house.”

“Your house?” Elbridge staggered closer, breath like spoiled wine. “You're a peddler of filth, Harker. This place is a sewer with curtains.”

The room was silent.

Charles tilted his head, then gestured. “Take him out.”

The two doormen grabbed the lord, who began thrashing and shouting, “You’ll hang for this, you foreign-bred cur! I’ll bring the Company! The Watch! You’re finished!”

Charles followed them to the door. As the streetlamp lit Elbridge’s contorted face, Charles leaned in and said quietly, “Go home, my lord. Sleep it off. And if you come here again, it will be your *last* visit.”

They dumped him into his private carriage. A servant scrambled in behind, avoiding Charles’s gaze.

Back inside, Charles found Lucia in the dressing room. He handed her a small pouch of silver and nodded. “You did nothing wrong. Take a week off. The others will cover you.”

She sniffled and nodded, grateful.

That night, Charles didn’t sleep. He sat in his office, pipe smoldering, mind racing.

In the morning, a sealed letter arrived — marked with Parliament wax.

It began: *“Mr. Harker. Concerning the disturbance last night…”*

Trouble was brewing.

A week after the Elbridge incident, the **London Morning Herald** published a modest piece on “the rise of exotic vice in Soho.” No names. No addresses. Just a faint smear, carefully worded. But Charles knew a brushstroke when he saw one — and who held the brush.

Two days later, an inspector arrived.

He wore a thick wool coat, moustache trimmed like a ruler, and carried a wax-sealed writ. “By order of Lord Elbridge, Member of Parliament,” he declared, flashing the paper at Charles’s doorman. “Inspection of premises for violations of morality and public order.”

Charles greeted him personally in the front parlour, dressed in a tailored blue coat, his cane resting beside him like a symbol of office.

“You’re welcome to look,” Charles said, voice smooth. “You’ll find no girls forced, no smoke sold unlawfully, and no laws broken. Only pleasure, freely chosen.”

The inspector wandered through the Golden Elephant, scribbling in a small notebook. He interviewed a few cabaret girls — all well-fed, well-dressed, and not the least bit interested in betraying the man who paid them double most theatre salaries.

He tested the opium. High quality, imported for "medicinal use" and "restorative purpose" — the same loophole used by other gentlemen's clubs. Legally grey, not black.

He left two hours later, stiff-backed. No fine. No charges.

But Charles knew this wasn’t over.

That night, he called for Salim, now his trusted fixer in London.

“Elbridge is a cornered dog,” Charles said, pipe curling smoke around his words. “He knows I could ruin him if I wanted to — but he's not stupid enough to duel me in the street. He’ll keep trying to claw.”

Salim nodded. “Should I speak to Hale or Vane?”

“Not yet,” Charles replied. “I want him sweating. Let the silence bother him.”

He paused, then added, “But I want a file on him. Find out who he owes, what rooms he visits, what servants whisper. Everyone’s got something they don’t want seen.”

Meanwhile, word spread in the undercurrent of the city: the Golden Elephant had survived inspection untouched.

In the taverns of Whitechapel, men spoke of a “smokehouse for kings.” In Covent Garden, women in rouge and pearls passed rumors behind fans — that somewhere in Soho, the best opium in England flowed like candlewax.

In truth, Charles's den wasn't the first in London. Others had existed in East End shadows since the 1810s — murky holes run by former sailors and Chinese migrants, peddling muddy opium in clay pipes for pennies. But none had dared the velvet-laced vision Charles brought. None wore a silk mask and called itself a club.

That was new. That was bold.

And now, it was visible.

He couldn't afford another scandal. Not yet. Not until he had enough friends in Parliament and the Bank.

Charles tapped ash into the silver tray and looked toward the window. "Bring me dirt on Elbridge," he said again. "Everyone's clean until they owe the wrong man."

Salim nodded. "You'll have it within the week."

Charles sat in his study at the Golden Elephant, the lamps dimmed low, smoke coiling from his pipe. A knock sounded on the heavy door.

"Enter," he said.

It was Maura, the cabaret girl Elbridge had struck — a bruise still yellowing beneath the rouge on her cheek. She stepped in hesitantly, silk shawl wrapped tight around her shoulders.

"You sent for me, Mr. Harker?"

Charles gestured to the seat opposite his desk. "Yes. Sit."

She sat.

For a moment, he simply looked at her — not cruelly, but with the cold gaze of a man weighing options.

"You've been quiet since the incident," he said at last. "I've covered your pay. Saw to your comfort. But you know what that pig did was illegal. Unforgivable."

Maura nodded slowly, looking down at her hands. "I didn't want trouble."

"I know," Charles said. "But the trouble came anyway."

He reached into a drawer and withdrew an envelope. Inside, a neat stack of crisp Bank of England notes.

He set it gently on the table between them.

“Here’s what I want,” he said. “You’ll go to the magistrate’s court and swear an affidavit. You’ll say Lord Elbridge struck you across the face. That he tried to pull you into one of the private rooms against your will. That you screamed. That two staff pulled him off you — and they’ll back your story.”

Her eyes widened as she stared at the envelope.

Charles gave a thin smile. “Let’s just say the man you saw isn’t used to hearing ‘no’. And when he does, he makes it everyone else’s problem.”

She hesitated, fingers brushing the envelope. “Will the court listen to a girl like me?”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Charles replied. “They won’t need to. Once your accusation is official, his enemies will do the rest. There are more than a few people waiting for the excuse to knife that man in Parliament. You’ll just be giving them the dagger.”

Maura bit her lip. “And… if he comes after me?”

“He won’t,” Charles said firmly. “My men will walk you to court. And if he tries anything — well, let’s say he’ll regret it.”

She took the envelope at last, tucking it into her coat.

“I’ll do it,” she whispered. “He deserves worse.”

Charles stood and walked her to the door.

“Oh, and Maura?” he said, as she opened it.

She turned.

“When it’s over, take a holiday. Go to Brighton. Or Paris. I’ll cover it.”

She gave him a grateful, nervous smile and slipped out into the hallway.

The magistrate’s court smelled of damp wool and ink. Benches creaked as men shifted their weight, the air thick with whispers. Maura stood near the front, hands folded, shawl pulled close. Two men from the Golden Elephant waited a few steps behind her, hats in their hands, eyes forward. Charles was not there. He did not need to be.

“Call the complainant,” the clerk said.

Maura stepped forward. She spoke clearly. She did not embellish. She did not falter. She told of the smoke room, the door half-closed, the sudden hand at her wrist, the blow that rang her head. She spoke of the breath on her cheek, the words slurred and hot, the struggle. When she paused, the room breathed with her.

The magistrate leaned back. “You swear this is true?”

“I do,” Maura said.

The first witness was called. He described the sound of the chair breaking, the shout, the sight of Elbridge swaying, red-faced, fist raised. The second witness spoke of pulling Elbridge away, of the man’s laugh, of the threat shouted toward the door. Their voices did not shake.

Elbridge arrived late. He stood stiffly, jaw clenched, eyes glassy with rage. His counsel rose, objected, sputtered. The magistrate listened, then waved him down.

“Sit,” the magistrate said. “You’ll have your turn.”

Elbridge’s turn came and went quickly. He denied. He blamed the smoke. He spoke of insult, of provocation. His words slid off the room. A murmur spread, then stilled.

The magistrate set a date and ordered Elbridge to post bond. As the gavel fell, a reporter slipped out, already writing.

By evening, the paper boys were shouting. Names were printed. Not addresses, not the club. Names.

At the Golden Elephant, the lamps burned as usual. Charles stood at the bar, listening. A man at a corner table read aloud, voice low.

“Attempted assault… breach of conduct… allegations by a performer…”

Charles lifted his glass and said nothing.

Two days later, a committee formed. Elbridge did not attend. A week after that, he resigned his seat “for reasons of health.” His friends stopped calling. His creditors did not.

Maura left for Brighton under another name. The witnesses were promoted quietly. The inspector did not return.

On a rain-soaked afternoon, Salim brought a folded note to Charles’s study.

“It’s done,” Salim said.

Charles nodded. He wrote a short letter, sealed it, and placed it with the outgoing post. Outside, the city moved on, already bored.

That night, the Golden Elephant was full. Pipes warmed. Glasses clinked. Men laughed softly and leaned back into velvet. Charles walked the rooms, slow and even, his eyes calm.

At the door, Finch turned away a man who argued too loudly.

“Another night,” Finch said, closing the door.

Inside, the smoke curled and settled. The house breathed.

Brand

The year was 1822, and *Elephant* had become a name whispered in corners of Cantonese tea houses and London's private clubs alike — not just an opium brand, but a mark of refinement. Among traders, buyers, and users, it had risen to signify something purer, stronger, and more meticulously crafted than the bulk bricks flooding the ports from East India Company warehouses.

In Canton, Charles never showed his face.

Instead, Arjun and Salim — his trusted intermediaries — moved like shadows between docks, merchant offices, and quiet teahouses where trade was sealed in low murmurs over hot cups. They dealt with men like Liang Wu and his counterparts in Ningbo and Quanzhou, always bearing crates marked with the quiet emblem: the elephant with a blooming poppy in its trunk.

"Never name the master," Salim reminded a dockworker once, as he slipped him a handful of silver to look the other way.

Back in India, it was Kerpal who steered the expanding fleet. Using Charles's gold, he procured **four** trade ships, each registered under forged documents — false names, fabricated cargo manifests, and forged seals borrowed from corrupt East India Company officers willing to look the other way for the right price.

"We're legal," Kerpal said once with a half-smile, "until someone looks too closely."

One of the new vessels was named The Jasmine Wind, another Midnight River. They sailed on regular rotations: Patna → Calcutta → Canton → Singapore → back again. Every stop was greased by coin, every manifest scripted to show cotton, rice, or silks — never opium.

Charles, meanwhile, was in London — never near the dirt, only the gold.

He watched from a high window of the Golden Elephant Club, reading Kerpal's reports weekly, shipments monthly, profits rising. Letters came coded, but he knew the numbers well. Each crate sold at 200 sterling. They moved nearly 200 crates a year now, and more buyers were asking for exclusivity.

In one letter, Kerpal wrote:

"The price of trust is always silver, but now we must pay in silence too. The officials ask fewer questions when their pockets are full."

Charles smiled at that. He took out his pipe, packed in a soft curl of Elephant opium, and leaned back as smoke laced the ceiling.

“Let them chase ghosts,” he murmured.

London was busy pretending the opium wasn’t coming in.

And Charles was busy becoming the man who sent it.

By 1826, *Elephant* had curled its scent around the very veins of London.

Opium was still a quiet indulgence, never spoken of in polite society — but behind drawn velvet drapes and inside satin-lined rooms, it burned slow and sweet in pipes carved from ivory and rosewood. And Charles Harker was the unseen hand behind it all.

His reach had grown.

Two more dens had opened in the past year alone. One, in the East End, was cleverly masked as a gambling house — loud laughter and the clatter of dice upstairs, but below, in the smoke-thick cellars, lay row upon row of bamboo mattresses and long-limbed shadows lost in the haze of Elephant.

“Keep the place raucous,” Charles had told his man who ran it. “Noise up top, silence below. Let them forget which floor they’re on.”

The second den had been quieter — tucked into Camden, accessible only through a bookshop’s back hallway. That one catered to artists, playwrights, and eccentric society types. They called it *The Poppy Room*.

But Charles no longer managed such things personally. His *lieutenants* handled the dens. He remained the face in shadow, showing himself only where it mattered.

And these days, he was being invited in.

A banker named Seymour Wells had first introduced him to the circuit — one of many who’d spent nights in the Golden Elephant, laughing softly with smoke between his teeth.

“You must join us at Chesterfield House next week,” Seymour had said one evening. “The Marquess is terribly fond of your... blend.”

The gatherings were lavish — soft candlelight on crystal decanters, whispered music, and a quiet space upstairs where “trusted gentlemen” could recline in silence. The pipes were never openly discussed, but they were always there.

At one such event, a familiar man with a powdered wig and Parliament pin leaned closer to Charles behind a plume of smoke. “You’ve changed London, whoever you are,” he said with a smile. “I’d vote for you if you ran for office.”

Charles only chuckled. “I prefer my dealings off the floor.”

By now, he was known without a name. Never introduced as the man behind Elephant — just a mysterious patron with impeccable tailoring, deep pockets, and unmatched discretion.

And it paid.

Investments came easier. Doors opened. A whispered nod from Charles could seat him next to MPs, judges, financiers, and colonial agents — some of whom had known exactly what they were smoking, and others who didn't care.

In another letter from Kerpal:

"The crates arrived, but we must change our seal. Some eyes grow too curious. I've sent you samples of the new mark — a lotus blossom instead of the poppy."

Charles held the sketch in his hand, then burned it in the fireplace.

In London, the Elephant was quiet. But it walked in every room.

The year 1828 brought no storms — not yet — but the wind was changing.

In Bengal, fields of red bloomed wider than ever. The British East India Company, now operating under stricter government oversight, had turned its eye sharply back toward opium. It was no longer just a merchant's game; it was state business, wrapped in ledgers and silk-bound contracts. Fields were surveyed, quotas enforced. Farmers had less choice. The crop had become a matter of policy — one that moved under the banner of imperial revenue.

Kerpal wrote from Patna:

"They push hard now. Whole villages are turned over. The Company pays little, demands much. Our men still work free, but we must remain careful. Too much visibility and someone may ask questions."

Charles read it with a glass of brandy in hand, pipe resting on the edge of his desk. He knew what it meant: Time was shortening.

Meanwhile, in China, the hypocrisy thickened.

Opium was illegal there, by imperial decree — an order backed by moral warnings and harsh punishments. But the coastlines told another story. Smuggling was alive, well-fed, and tacitly allowed, especially when it served British interests.

Ships flew false flags. Bribes passed hands like coins at market. Local officials turned their heads, and British agents pretended their hands were clean.

The Elephant still moved through this shadow economy. Crates stamped with the lotus seal reached Quanzhou, Ningbo, and Canton, hidden beneath tea leaves or pottery. Salim and Arjun remained Charles's voice on the sea, trusted and silent.

"The buyers trust our measure," Salim had written. *"Liang Wu says your name earns respect. The Company's bricks crumble in water. Ours hold flame."*

But perhaps the most insidious change of all was happening in London itself — not in back alleys or dens, but in medicine cabinets and ladies' purses.

Laudanum — a tincture of opium mixed with alcohol — was now a household cure. Doctors prescribed it for coughs, melancholy, sleeplessness, even for children. It was cheaper than wine, easier to hide than whiskey, and entirely unregulated.

At apothecaries in Soho and Whitechapel, it was sold in unmarked vials with floral labels. The Golden Elephant itself kept bottles behind the bar — mixed into cocktails for favored guests.

There was no backlash. The newspapers were silent. The politicians indulged. Opium was not a sin — it was a luxury, or else a quiet balm for the nerves of London's weary elite.

Charles watched it all unfold with a gambler's grin.

"Let the Company flood the fields," he said once to his accountant. "Let China pretend it doesn't notice. Let London sleep with laudanum by its bed. So long as they whisper and deny, I'll keep selling the truth in smoke."

The empire was feeding on the poppy, and it didn't even know it was dreaming.

The year turned — and with it, winds of warning blew from the East.

In spring, a letter arrived from Arjun, sealed in haste and stained with sea salt:

"The magistrate in Quanzhou has changed. Not a man we know. Six buyers seized last month. One — Huang Shun, your first contact there — was executed publicly in the square. The Company buys protection. We do not. We must tread carefully."

Charles read the letter in his Soho study, fingers tight around the page, the opium in his pipe gone cold. Huang Shun had been with him for a decade. The man had hosted him in his own home once — modest, loyal, clever. Now dead for a crate of Elephant.

He folded the letter neatly, placed it in a drawer, and stood silent at the window.

In Canton, smoke no longer concealed all crimes.

The Daoguang Emperor, though aging and distant, had begun tightening the noose. Reports of addiction in imperial households and military ranks had forced a response. New local

governors were appointed — zealous men, not yet bought. They launched inquiries, arrested known traders, and seized ships suspected of carrying the "black dirt." The corruption that had long lubricated the opium trade was still present, but now, so was fear.

In Ningbo, Salim wrote of shifting loyalties:

"Liang Wu paid three officials last week. It was not enough. His warehouse was searched. He escaped to the countryside — has not returned. His cousin now speaks for him. We do not stay ashore long. The docks are watched."

Charles convened a quiet meeting in the back room of the Golden Elephant, the gas lamps burning low. Kerpal, visiting from India, sat across the table with ledgers open, his face grave.

"They've killed Huang Shun," Charles said quietly.

"That will not be the last," Kerpal replied. "We may be next. Or those boys you send."

Charles poured two glasses of wine. "Then we change routes. Smaller loads. More hands. Spread the risk."

Kerpal hesitated. "We could pull back."

Charles smiled without warmth. "Too many years behind us for retreat. We adapt."

He turned to Elias, a trusted club associate, formerly an EIC mid-clerk turned rogue agent.

"Find me men who've worked Company routes — Canton, Macau, Hong Kong. Men who'll carry a box and never ask what's inside. And we start bribing again — not just officials, but their wives, their sons. Anyone with a pocket."

By summer, Charles had cut Quanzhou loose. Too hot. Too many eyes. He rerouted through Amoy (Xiamen) — quieter, more corruptible.

He also reduced shipment volume, but increased purity — fewer crates, same profit. Every ball of Elephant was now cured longer, kneaded twice, and sealed in wax-stamped bricks that buyers could trust.

But trust, Charles knew, was now as fragile as the law in China.

And the first real warnings of what would one day become war had begun.

A letter from Canton arrived in mid-autumn. Wax seal broken and re-tied. Delivered not by the usual runner, but a nameless boy with a scar across his cheek.

Inside, Liang Wu's brushstrokes trembled:

Charles,
The tide has turned, for real this time. They're not just posturing anymore.
Four junks loaded with "medicine" were boarded by imperial soldiers before reaching Whampoa. Two crews vanished — not arrested. Vanished.
I've sent my son to Macau. I will not be staying in Canton much longer. This is no longer about bribes and blind eyes. This is politics. This is war in slow motion.

Charles read it three times in silence, then lit a stick of opium and smoked at the window of his Soho apartment. Below, carriages clattered by. Laughter floated from nearby taverns. In London, business still seemed smooth, but he felt the edge fray — both East and West.

A week later, news from Arjun arrived from Calcutta.

"One of our smaller cargo junks, bound for Macau, never arrived. Last seen near Hainan Island. We believe it was seized by coastal patrols or pirates working for the Qing. Forty crates — gone."

That was nearly £8,000 in Elephant, dissolved into silence.

Charles closed the letter, rang the bell. A servant entered.

"Bring me Hale. Now."

Within the hour, the greasy Company man appeared in his study, looking uneasy.

"You didn't hear it from me," Hale said, "but London's shifting. Not officially, of course. But there's word in the Commons. Back-benchers are murmuring about *decadence*… addiction among the poor."
"And the source?"
"Opium. Always the same tune. But they're linking it to urban poverty now. Working-class women with laudanum bottles. Factory boys nodding off. It's not just a China problem anymore, Charles."
"And my name?"
"No one says your name."

Charles took a sip of port and stared into the fire.

In the Golden Elephant, business was still golden. Rich men still came at twilight, ordered a pipe in the velvet-smoked chambers, and slipped into dreams with cabaret girls on their laps. There was laughter, wine, and games of chess by gaslight.

But behind the curtains, Charles was tightening the books. With one hand, he cut less reliable buyers. With the other, he wrote to Kerpal:

From now on: smaller ships, smaller routes. Fewer crates. No more than 20 per run. Use trusted men only. If one is caught, the whole does not bleed.

He stared at the balance sheet.

Last year's profit: £61,000
This year so far: £47,500

Not ruinous. But the direction was clear.

In Whitechapel, one of Charles's lower-end dens was raided by a moral reform society, accompanied by a local magistrate. No arrests, but pamphlets began appearing:
"THE ELEPHANT THAT CRUSHES THE POOR"
"OPIUM — THE SILKEN PLAGUE OF ENGLAND"

The headlines didn't mention him. But they soon would.

And in China, more than smoke was rising.

1832 to 1835 was time of chaos and opportunity

Charles Harker sat in the rear chamber of the *Golden Elephant*, pipe in hand, reading a translation of a missionary report — smuggled from Canton by a European printer. The name at the top: Charles Gutzlaff.

"Peasants are bent like wilted stalks," the missionary wrote.
"Whole villages sink into ruin. Husbands sell their children for a pipe more."

Charles exhaled a stream of smoke.

"Romantic fools," he muttered.
"If they only sold dreams, maybe they'd understand the cost of waking."

A letter arrived from Kerpal:

Big news from Company halls. The Crown is ending the East India Company monopoly. 1834 — it's done. The ports will open. Every trader with coin and courage will set sail. Good for us… and bad. Everyone wants a bite now.
I've already seen new names sniffing at the poppy fields. Madras men, Bombay merchants, Dutch and Portuguese middlemen.
The jungle is loud again.

Charles read it twice. Then wrote back:

Use the confusion. Flood the quieter routes. Sell under false names if needed. The Company is no longer our master — but neither is it our shield. Do not trust anyone with clean hands.

In London, new trading firms sprang up like weeds. Men with silk waistcoats and forged licenses claimed fortunes in China. Some died at sea. Some struck gold. Some came crawling back to beg at Charles's door.

The Elephant remained strong, though the field had grown crowded. Charles diversified — selling to newer buyers who had lost their Company backing.

He sat across from a newcomer, James Kellington, pale and stuttering.

“I can’t match your quality,” the man confessed.
“But I have the contacts. The river towns. The smaller ports. They know me.”

Charles handed him a brick of Elephant and smiled.

“Then make them forget everything else they ever smoked.”

Lord Napier arrived in Canton, all pride and protocol. He dismissed the Qing court’s etiquette, refusing to bow, and demanded direct access to trade.

The Chinese slammed their doors.

Then, opium prices crashed — the glut of private traders meant over-supply. Shipments sat anchored offshore, rotting.

Back in London, Charles read the reports in the trading gazettes:

“Prices fall by half in Macau.Three smuggling vessels seized at Amoy.Opium glut may signal market collapse.”

He paced the halls of the Golden Elephant and spoke aloud to no one:

“Too many mouths in one bowl. Time to carve a new one.”

He ordered Arjun and Salim to stop selling in open harbors. From now on, it would be rivers, private docks, night deals. Less glory. More control.

The profit lines were erratic now, but the Elephant still stood.

And while the missionaries wailed, the priests condemned, and Parliament murmured about morality, the London dens were full. Velvet curtains drawn. Pipes glowing in shadow.

Charles wasn’t just weathering the storm.
He was learning to bend the winds.

The year is 1836. The sun hung low over London, amber through fogged glass. Charles sat alone in the back room of the Golden Elephant, a letter in hand, the wax seal torn with haste.

It was from *Liang Wu* — the calligraphy tense, hurried.

“Lin Zexu has arrived. He carries the Emperor’s seal. Canton is no longer safe — he has begun the purge. They’ve already seized three warehouses. Two of our last Elephant

shipments were burned publicly. My men fled. The buyers have gone silent. I fear more will be arrested... or worse."

Charles folded the paper slowly, eyes narrowing.

Another letter sat on the table — this one from Kerpal, still in Calcutta, written days earlier.

"British troops have begun gathering near the Bengal coast. Rumors of escalation are everywhere. The Company fears disruption to its 'trade interest,' and the officers are uneasy. Something is coming. Prepare, brother."

Charles stood, lighting his pipe. The curl of smoke that drifted upward smelled of poppy resin and danger.

He called for Arjun and Salim. They entered the study moments later, their boots damp from the foggy streets.

"The Chinese are closing the ports," Charles said, handing Liang Wu's letter to Salim.
"Lin Zexu?" Arjun asked.
"The Emperor's enforcer**,"** Charles nodded. "And a true one. He'll purge every corrupt official, burn every ounce of opium. Liang says the streets are silent now. No bribes. No trade. We're out of China for the moment."

Arjun exhaled. "So we pull back?"

Charles walked to the cabinet, poured a glass of aged port, and sipped.

"No," he said. "We wait. We shift."

He reached for the ledgers on his desk and opened them — tracking names, shipments, gold tallies.

"We double London. East End. Docklands. Anywhere the opium still flows. We feed the demand here while the East burns."

Salim raised an eyebrow. "And China?"

Charles smiled thinly. "Let the Empire think it's won. We'll be back before the ash cools."

That night, as lamplight danced on mahogany, Charles penned two more letters — one to Kerpal, instructing to hold all outgoing shipments until further word. The other, sealed in red wax, was for Liang Wu.

"Survive. Hide what you must. The Elephant forgets nothing."

He pressed the seal shut with his ring, then sat back and smoked in silence.
Outside, the fog of London crept along the cobbles — but inside, the air was thick with war.

In 1837 the ledger ink bled in the candlelight, lines blurring as Charles rubbed his eyes.

Another shipment cost report from Burma.

“Thirty-seven percent loss on the last run,” he muttered. “They’re bleeding me.”

The new Burma route was longer, harder, and increasingly dangerous. Pirates in the Gulf, corrupt minor officials demanding levies at every checkpoint. Horses died. Roads washed out. And the price of rice was rising, making every laborer want a raise.

Charles sat back in his leather chair in the Golden Elephant’s private study, staring at the fire. He tossed the crumpled parchment into the hearth.

Kerpal had done his best to shift supply from the Bengal plantations to Burma, but the result was obvious: the opium made it to London, but barely. And the cost of keeping it moving was slicing into his fortune.

“We can’t sustain Burma,” he said aloud.

He needed another play. One closer to home.

And so he began pulling the threads in London.

At Parliament, men in fine waistcoats debated trade and tariffs. Behind closed doors, Charles was slipping envelopes to three key Members — discreet, predictable men, already deep in India Company stock.

They never asked for the money. They simply accepted it and read aloud the papers he wanted heard.

“The recent rumblings in China are unfortunate,” one MP declared in a quiet session, “but let us not forget the civilizing benefits of the poppy — how many working men in this city find peace at the end of a pipe?”

The next day, one of Charles’s anonymous articles appeared in The Morning Post:

“Opium — The Civilized Man’s Retreat”

“In a world gripped by smoke and steel, where man is stretched between chimney and coin, there must remain a place for refinement. Opium, when administered with restraint, elevates — not destroys. It is not the substance but the vulgar excess that draws decay. Let not the errors of the East condemn the tranquility of the West.”

It was accompanied by a sketch: a gentleman in a silk robe, reclining peacefully on a velvet couch, pipe in hand — a lion resting at his feet.

The image was clear: opium wasn’t the vice of beggars — it was the indulgence of kings.

At the Golden Elephant, foot traffic swelled again. The elite came discreetly, smiling behind masks of decorum, asking for “The Retreat.” And the girls whispered, as they handed pipes to trembling fingers:

“You’re safe here.”

Charles watched from the upper balcony of the club, gazing down over laughter, smoke, and silk. His empire had shifted. But it still stood.

A moonless night in Soho. The rain had stopped an hour ago, leaving the cobbled streets slick and dark under the gaslamps’ yellow flicker. Charles walked alone, his cane clicking faintly, the collar of his overcoat turned high against the wind. The Golden Elephant’s doors had closed late, and his breath curled in the cold as he made his way down Brewer Street, heading toward his private residence off the alley near Greek Street.

A dog barked once in the distance. Then silence again.

As Charles passed a narrow turn between two shuttered shops, he paused — something in the air, a shift. Instinct. A whisper of movement.

Too late.

A shadow lunged from the alley, fast and low. A flash of steel — and then pain, hot and sudden, tore through Charles’s side. He stumbled backward with a gasp, blood already staining his waistcoat.

The assassin was silent, masked, swift. He struck again, but Charles twisted, the blade scraping his ribs.

Charles gritted his teeth and drew his own knife from his coat. With one desperate motion, he slashed forward, catching the attacker’s cheek and smashing the hilt into his face. A grunt, the crunch of nose breaking — blood spilled.

The attacker reeled, staggered — then vanished into the alley like smoke, leaving Charles heaving and bleeding on the wet cobbles.

Charles fell to his knees, vision swimming.

Footsteps. A gasp. Then voices.

"God above — he’s hurt!"

“Someone get a doctor!”

“Is that… that’s Charles Harker, isn’t it?”

Two passersby crouched beside him, trying to stop the bleeding with a crumpled coat. Within minutes, a local doctor was summoned, and a carriage brought him to St. Bartholomew's under heavy gaslight.

Charles lay in his bed, the wound healing, ribs bound tight, a flask of laudanum nearby for the pain. His doctor had said he was lucky — the blade missed his liver by inches.

Kerpal's letter lay unopened on the desk. Charles reached for it, but stopped.

He turned instead to the window, watching the London rain sheet down the glass.

"They're trying to kill me now," he muttered.

Then he smiled faintly, pulling the blanket tighter.

"That means they're afraid."

In the following years the fires burned high over Canton's harbors — towering pillars of smoke where once the Empire's poison floated in crates of polished teak and steel-gray wax. Lin Zexu, Imperial Commissioner of the Qing, made no quiet gestures. He ordered the destruction of over 20,000 chests of opium, their contents poured out like blood onto the sand and washed away by tides.

In Canton, dealers were arrested, flogged, or executed. Ports closed. Bribes no longer opened gates. And the name *Elephant* — once whispered with hunger in silk-filled dens — was now blacklisted, purged from the underworld by decree.

Liang Wu's letter was brief and smeared with panic:

"They've burned my storehouses. Arrested two of my kin. The 'Elephant' is known. It is hunted."

Back in London, Charles read it in silence in his club's study, fingers drumming lightly on the mahogany desk. He had seen empire shape itself before — but now the tide shifted. Not against the Qing. But against him.

In Parliament, heated debate rang across the benches.

"Shall we go to war," thundered one Tory MP, "to protect a trade in vice? A trade in filth that rots the soul of an entire people?"

"It is not the drug," came the counter, "but the principle. Our merchants were treated unlawfully, our property destroyed. This is an affront to the Crown."

And then came William Gladstone, young but sharp as razors, rising in the House:

"A war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know — and have not read of."

His words were cold water splashed across a room of hawks.

But Charles knew how these things moved. Men wrung hands in Parliament — but they still smoked Elephant in his club, or tucked tincture into coat pockets, claiming it was for digestion, or nerves, or dreams.

He leaned back in his chair and tapped ash into a silver dish. "They can debate all they like," he muttered to Salim across the room, "but when the tea stops flowing and the silk dries up — they'll come for blood."

Outside, rain battered the cobbled streets of Soho. War was coming. The only question now was: *how soon?*

The city no longer whispered about opium — it began to hiss.

In drawing rooms once cloaked with velvet and smoke, where *Elephant* pipes were passed hand to hand between Lords and poets, voices had grown cautious. Too many eyes. Too many pamphlets. Too many pulpits thundering on Sundays.

The shift was slow but unmistakable. Charles first noticed it when a cabaret singer at the *Golden Elephant* told him one of her wealthier clients had declined a pipe, saying:

"I must think of my reputation. The bishop's wife was seated next to me at dinner."

It had begun.

Churchmen wrote sermons about moral decay. Opium dens were denounced as "dens of Eastern vice", as if sin had come to London in a crate from Calcutta. Morning papers published engraved illustrations of wasted men with hollow cheeks and women asleep with pipes dangling from their hands. The captions read:

"The Death of England's Conscience — One Puff at a Time."

Charles's name was not yet printed, but he could feel it circling. Less applause. Less cover. More whispers.

In Parliament, even those who once defended the trade became vague.

Sir Andrew Hale, once a reliable ally, declined a private dinner. When Charles confronted him at a gentlemen's hall in Kensington, Hale sipped brandy and offered only:

"You know how it is. The Church has found a cause. And the Crown is watching Canton."

"And you?" Charles asked, voice like stone.

Hale adjusted his cuff. "I'm… observing the mood."

Charles returned to Soho that night with a thin line pressed into his brow. In his office, he poured wine he didn't drink and stared at the flickering firelight. Salim stood in the doorway, quiet.

"The wind's changing," Salim finally said.

"Let it blow," Charles replied, though softer than before. "So long as we stand on stone."

But even the stone of fortune cracks under enough rain.

The opium flowed, yes — in crates, in tinctures, in the lungs of London. But influence was trickling away. And political cover, once thick as velvet, was wearing thin.

In 1839 the letters from Canton stopped.

For weeks, Charles waited by the window of his Soho residence, pipe in hand, watching the fog creep between the buildings. Each morning he asked the doorman. Each morning, nothing. No word from Liang Wu. No manifest. No gold.

Then came the news:
One of the final Elephant ships — the *Carrowmere*, flagged under false Company documents — had been seized off the coast of Guangdong. The cargo confiscated. The captain, an old Goan sailor named Marcellin, was imprisoned by Qing authorities. No trial, no negotiation.

Kerpal's letters from Calcutta turned grim.

"The harbor talk is full of war," he wrote.
"Lin Zexu has sealed the ports in Canton. Elephant is no longer safe here. I have hidden what remains. But the market is gone."

In London, things only worsened.

A tip — anonymous, but clearly Company-fed — landed on a magistrate's desk, detailing two decades of "unauthorized commercial activity" between Charles Harker and Eastern ports. The language was vague, but dangerous enough.

Days later, Charles was called into the Bank of England. A stone-faced manager led him into a private room.

"We've been instructed to review the legitimacy of certain foreign transactions," the man said. "Pending further inquiry, we must restrict access to your holdings. Temporarily."

"On whose authority?" Charles asked, coldly.

The man straightened his cravat. "Colonial Affairs Office, in consultation with East India Company legal review. I'm sure it's just routine, Mr. Harker."

But Charles knew it wasn't. It was a warning. His empire — once invisible, untouchable — was now a bright red mark on ledgers passed across desks in Whitehall.

He left the bank in silence, stepped out onto Threadneedle Street, and stood beneath the shadow of the lion-headed arch.

He didn't need a letter now to know.

The war had already begun.

The air outside the Bank of England was colder than it should've been in spring. Charles Harker stood beneath the carved stone arch of Threadneedle Street, staring into the smoke of his elephant bone pipe as the weight of the banker's words settled over him like frost:

"Your accounts are frozen pending review, Mr. Harker… Company pressure, you understand."

He understood all too well.

He dropped the pipe into his coat pocket, turned sharply on his heel, and hailed a carriage.

"Docklands," he told the driver. "Fast as your horse can take us."

He would not sit in a drawing room and let his empire collapse. Not after what he'd built with blood and bone and poppy.

Two days later, Charles boarded the Albatross, a broad-hulled East Indiaman bound for Calcutta. He traveled alone — no servants, no guards. Just his cane, his coat, and a sealed trunk of cash, gold, and ledgers. He stared out over the grey Atlantic, the salt wind biting at his scarred shoulder as the ship cut east.

The voyage took nearly three months — slow winds, storms off Madagascar, and a detour through the Andaman Sea. When the vessel finally cut into the Hooghly River, Calcutta's haze greeted him like an old ghost.

Kerpal was waiting at the docks, older and leaner now, his turban streaked with grey.

"You came," he said.

"Had no choice," Charles replied. "Tell me how bad."

Kerpal didn't speak for a long moment. Instead, he turned and motioned toward a waiting cart.

"Come. You'd best hear it on the road."

They rode through the sweating heat of Bengal, past the port warehouses and narrow alleys that once bustled with crates and coin. Charles noticed fewer carts, fewer workers.

And then came the truth.

It happened faster than Charles ever imagined.

First, it was the sea routes. Qing patrols sealed off every southern port. Liang Wu was never heard from again. Whether he fled, was arrested, or executed — Charles never learned. Elephant shipments vanished en route or were seized at the docks. Captains went missing. Crews deserted. Insurance claims were denied outright — "invalid under wartime classification."

Next came the buyers. One by one, the trusted merchants in Quanzhou, Ningbo, and even Macao stopped replying. Letters were returned, stamped unreadable or simply torn. No more payments. No more requests.

Charles said nothing. Just watched the fields roll by in silence as the sun beat down.

The cart wheels shrieked under the weight of the crates. A line of fifteen horses, sweating and dust-covered, groaned up the slope behind the old warehouse wall, their drivers snapping reins and shouting over the noise.

Charles stood beside Kerpal in the midday heat at the Patna District plantation, the ground dry under his boots. He pulled the silk scarf tighter around his neck, eyes sharp, watching every crate of *Elephant* lifted and loaded.

"Faster, you bastards!" Kerpal bellowed, waving a cane. "Move like you're running from the rope!"

One of the younger workers stumbled, nearly dropping a crate. Kerpal marched over and smacked the boy hard behind the ear.

"Break one, and I'll send you to pick leeches off jungle pigs the rest of your life!"

The crates were bound with thick hemp rope, marked only by the elephant-and-poppy stamp — Charles's now-tainted brand. One hundred in total, pulled from the main storage building and rerouted to the secondary plantation near Barhia — the old tea plantation that Charles had repurposed years ago and kept quiet, almost forgotten by the Company.

As the last cart rolled out under moonlight, Charles exhaled.

"If they're coming, they'll come in the morning."

Kerpal gave a grim nod. "I'll sleep with the rifle."

Charles didn't answer. He simply walked into the land house, lit a pipe, and lay on the wooden cot with his boots on. Sleep came in waves.

The hammering came just after sunrise.

“Open in the name of the East India Company!”

Charles opened the door in a loose shirt, hair unkempt, eyes bloodshot from opium smoke. Four Company men stood in uniform, red-faced from the ride, armed and ready.

“Warehouse inspection,” the lead officer grunted. “You are Charles Harker?”

“Did I invite you in?” Charles asked dryly.

“By Company order—”

“I don’t give a dead rat’s tail what the Company orders,” Charles snapped. “This is my land. My property.”

“We have reason to believe opium is being stored here illegally.”

“Illegally?” Charles spat. “We cultivate tea here, officer. Fine lowland tea. Been at it for three years now. Perhaps you’d like a cup before you rifle through my walls like common thieves?”

Kerpal stood behind him silently, arms crossed, face dark with quiet rage.

The Company men stepped past him without a word.

They entered the warehouse, sniffing around the walls, tapping crates, opening dusty storerooms — but found nothing. Just sacks of dry tea leaves, a few rice bundles, and the scent of dust.

“Where are the others?” the officer demanded.

“Others?” Charles said, grinning faintly. “You think this is a carnival warehouse? You’ll find more here than tea and bad dreams.”

The officer stepped close, eyes narrow. “You’re on a list, Mr. Harker. Orders are coming down from Calcutta. Keep your affairs in line.”

“My affairs,” Charles growled, “are none of your fucking business. Tell your masters I’m a farmer. If they want to pluck poppies from ghosts, be my guest.”

The officer stared a moment longer, then gave a nod.

“Let’s move.”

The soldiers mounted up, and the party rode off, raising dust behind them.

Charles turned to Kerpal.

“Next time, they come with chains.”

“Then we’ll be gone before that,” Kerpal said. “Barhia is stocked. We just bought ourselves time.”

Charles looked east, where the fields once bloomed red.

“Time’s the last thing they want us to have.”

Two days passed at the Baharia fields, a smaller plantation nestled between low hills and thickets of sal. The air was still, the soil cracked dry from the heat. The warehouse there held 40 crates — crates Charles knew would not survive the season if things kept turning this way.

Charles and Kerpal had taken refuge in the overseer's longhouse, poring over maps and ship ledgers by candlelight.

“This batch needs to vanish,” Charles said, tapping the crate count with a grimy finger. “If the next boat don’t take it, it gets burned — or worse.”

“I have men,” Kerpal replied. “We can move half by cart before the week’s end.”

“We don’t have a week.”

The sound came early. Hooves. Metal. Orders barked in clipped English.

Charles stepped outside, squinting in the sun. Six Company men rode into the clearing, sabers at their belts, rifles slung on shoulders. A native clerk dismounted and approached with a sheaf of paper.

“Mr. Harker,” he said, not even greeting. “We are conducting a legal inspection under the authority of the East India Company.”

“This land’s mine,” Charles snapped. “You’ve no cause here.”

“We have every cause,” the officer in charge said, swinging down from his horse. His uniform was too clean for this place. “We're told you’re in possession of prohibited cargo.”

Kerpal muttered, “They know.”

“What you’ve been told,” Charles said coolly, stepping forward, “is a lie cooked up by jealous cowards in Calcutta.”

But the men were already walking past him toward the low wooden warehouse.

Charles turned to his overseer — a squat Bengali man named Haridran, who had worked the fields for seven years.

“With me.”

They followed the redcoats through the warehouse doors.

Inside, the smell hit instantly — sharp, earthy, narcotic. The crates sat stacked four high, stamped with the faded elephant-and-poppy seal.

“Well,” said the officer. “Looks like our day just got productive.”

He turned to his men.

“Confiscate the cargo. Open the crates. Burn them if you must.”

“Like hell you will,” Charles barked.

He stepped between the soldiers and the stack of crates, shoulders wide, jaw tight. His hand hovered near the hilt of his belt knife.

“This is private land. That’s private property.”

“This is contraband,” the officer snapped back. “And you’re trespassing on the Crown’s patience.”

“You want opium?” Charles shouted. “Go dig your Company rot out of Bengal swamps! This here — this is mine.”

One of the Company men stepped forward and grabbed the edge of a crate.

“Step aside,” he growled.

Charles’s hand moved faster than thought — he punched the man square in the jaw. The man stumbled backward, crashing into a pile of tools. Another reached for his rifle, but Haridran lunged, grabbing the barrel and shoving it away. The rifle fired into the air.

“Get off my land!” Charles roared, and tackled the officer to the ground.

They rolled through the red dirt outside, fists flying, Charles slamming his knuckles into the man’s face, blood spraying as bone cracked. The officer screamed, struggling.

Kerpal shouted to the workers to stay back, but panic erupted. Chickens scattered, oxen bellowed, and plantation hands ran in every direction.

Another Company man grabbed Haridran and beat him down with the butt of a rifle, the overseer falling with a grunt, lip split and eyes glazed.

Charles wouldn’t let go — driving punch after punch into the officer’s face, even as two soldiers tried to pull him off.

“He’s mad! Get him off!” someone yelled.

Charles spat blood and grit and growled,

“This is what you get when you bring trouble to my house!”

Finally, they pulled him off, kicking and cursing, shirt torn, fists bloodied. The officer lay groaning, face swollen, half-conscious.

The soldiers stood over Charles, weapons drawn — but unsure. The scene was chaos. There were too many eyes now. Too much noise.

Kerpal stepped in fast.

“Let us be,” he barked. “Or we ride to Calcutta with this story — Company men storming private land, assaulting civilians without warrant.”

The clerk hesitated, then leaned in to the officer, whispering.

Finally, the ranking officer, nose pouring blood, staggered to his feet and sneered.

“We’ll be back. With orders. With chains.”

“Bring an army,” Charles hissed. “And I’ll bury them under my f***ing poppy fields.”

The soldiers left.

Silence fell.

Kerpal helped Haridran to his feet. Charles wiped his hands with a torn cloth, shaking.

“We move it tonight,” he said. “Every last crate.”

The noose tightened with every letter that didn’t come, every port that refused to receive, every official that refused to meet their eye. Charles tried everything — quietly offloading Burma stock to local zamindars, redirecting crates to inland bazaars, even attempting backdoor deals through Nepali traders. But it was useless.

Without Canton, there was no artery — only capillaries that bled out one coin at a time.

Even Kerpal’s bribes began to fail. District magistrates who once shook his hand now avoided his eyes. One, a friendly clerk who’d taken money for years, muttered a warning to Kerpal outside the courthouse gate.

“You best leave before they come again,” he said, glancing around nervously. “You’re not the only one they’re watching.”

That night, Charles and Kerpal rode through the backroads, reaching the old hidden plantation near Baharia — a place once alive with workers, now overgrown with vines and

silence. Inside the stone-walled warehouse, 180 crates of Elephant sat waiting like ghosts of a fallen empire.

Charles stood in the doorframe, looking at the rows.

“Damn those maggots,” he muttered. “They’ll be here soon. If they take it—if they parade it through the courts or torch it in the squares—”

He turned to Kerpal, jaw clenched.

“We burn it. All of it. They don’t get to touch a single leaf. China trade is gone. And in India... this stuff sells for shitty peanuts. We’ve nothing left to fight with.”

Kerpal nodded. Not a man to flinch at ruin. Together, they pulled down old rags, doused them in lamp oil, and wrapped them around the crates like funeral garlands.

“One or two crates?” Kerpal asked. “For us?”

Charles gave a grim smirk.

“For cold nights and bitter memories.”

They rolled two crates onto a separate cart and hid them beneath a mound of burlap and straw. Then, they moved through the warehouse, scorching the stacks. Flames caught quickly on the old wood and oiled fabric. In moments, the entire building was a pyre.

Smoke rose in thick white-gray coils, poppy-sweet and suffocating, curling through the air like the ghosts of old profits. Charles stumbled backward, coughing, eyes wide and bloodshot.

“Bloody hell,” he said between gasps. “We’re getting high just watching it die.”

The two men staggered from the heat and haze, flames licking at the roof beams, snapping wood into cinders.

They mounted their horses, turning their backs as the inferno devoured Elephant’s last sanctuary. The hooves pounded into the dirt, racing down the hill — behind them, the sky glowed red.

The fires Charles lit in Baharia were only a flicker compared to the inferno ignited across oceans.

In London, outrage thundered through the halls of Parliament. Lord Palmerston, ever the imperial hawk, denounced the Qing Empire’s insolence — the destruction of over 20,000 chests of opium, the arrest of British merchants, the insult to Queen and commerce.

“The Chinese must be made to understand,” Palmerston declared, “that the British flag shall not be sullied, nor her merchants hindered.”

By spring of 1840, British ships—sleek steam-powered gunboats and men-of-war—sailed from India and Singapore toward Canton, armed with cannon, rifles, and iron resolve. It wasn't just retaliation. It was empire enforcing its gospel: trade must flow, and nothing—not morality, not sovereignty, not rebellion—would stop it.

The Royal Navy blockaded the Pearl River Delta, cutting off Canton from the sea. Bombardments began. British forces seized Chusan Island off the coast of Zhejiang to use as a staging post. The Chinese defenses, centuries outdated, crumbled under the brutal precision of British gunnery.

In the Battle of the Bogue Forts, British gunboats blasted through stone forts, their Congreve rockets shrieking overhead. Thousands of Qing troops fled, unable to match the firepower.

In Beijing, the Daoguang Emperor fumed and panicked, dispatching envoys and ordering reinforcements south. But it was too late. The British had no interest in peace without profit.

With blockades in the South China Sea, Chinese coastal patrols emboldened, and Qing soldiers arresting opium runners en masse, every private trader route collapsed.

Buyers vanished or were imprisoned. Chinese middlemen began turning on one another — fearing execution, they confessed names, even pointing toward foreign smugglers they had once honored. Elephant, though gone, was now infamous. The Company itself disavowed all independent smugglers, even those they'd once quietly tolerated.

There was no safe route. No friendly port.

Every name once whispered in confidence now drew death sentences in Qing courts.

The First Opium War wasn't merely about opium anymore. It was about dominance, ideology, humiliation. China fought for sovereignty; Britain fought for commercial imperialism.

And in the shadows, men like Charles, who had once thrived in the gray spaces of empire, now found those shadows lit ablaze — no longer protected, no longer wanted, no longer needed.

By autumn, only the Golden Elephant Club in Soho still bore Charles's mark — and even that flickered with tension, a dying ember in a shifting world.

The pipes still smoked, the velvet still shimmered under candlelight, but the laughter was thinner. The faces that came now were hushed, paranoid, glancing at the door after every sip. MPs stopped attending. Bankers grew cautious. The elite, once eager to sip from his pipe and bask in his legend, now moved in whispers.

“You hear what happened in Bombay?”
“They took his ships.”
“And the fourth?”
“Gone. Probably resting on the ocean floor.”

Three of Charles’s ships were confiscated in Bombay under new maritime controls. Opium vessels without Company seal were now considered illicit by both British and Indian authorities — part of the effort to show the world Britain was “cleaning house” while fighting China.

A fourth ship — the *Shanti Vahan* — never returned from the Bay of Bengal. No letters. No survivors. Just a drifting silence. Rumors swirled: pirates, Qing patrols, or simply desertion in the face of a collapsing empire.

His accounts remained frozen — locked behind bureaucratic doors at the Bank of England, pending an “inquiry.” His name was now attached to government memos labeled sensitive, unfavorable, and unofficially known.

“A trafficker,” one former ally said behind closed doors.
“A relic,” said another.
“A man who flew too close,” murmured a third, while puffing from a pipe Charles had likely paid for.

In the span of months, what had taken fourty years to build — an empire of crates, smoke, gold, and secrecy — dissolved into silence. No fanfare. No trials. Just paperwork, freezing of assets, and the slow decay of name and network.

Charles Harker became a cautionary tale — a symbol in private circles of rogue ambition, of what happens when enterprise outpaces empire. Some former associates denied knowing him. Others feigned confusion at the mention of “The Elephant.”

The air in Calcutta was thick with damp heat and dread. Monsoon rains had come and gone, leaving behind the kind of humidity that crept into bones and paper. The city murmured with rumors of war, of confiscations, of men once powerful now quietly vanishing.

In the back garden of Kerpal’s modest house, smoke coiled upward in lazy spirals. A mound of documents—ledgers, letters, manifests, coded records—crackled in the fire pit. Kerpal stood beside it with a bamboo stick, occasionally poking at the stack to ensure full destruction.

Inside the house, the door slammed open.

Arjun entered, soaked from the streets, his face tense and drawn. Charles sat shirtless by the window, smoking a long thin pipe. His wounded shoulder ached in the damp, but he said nothing.

“It’s done,” Arjun said, stepping through the door, his clothes soaked from the monsoon-drenched streets, face taut with tension.

Charles didn’t turn to look. He sat by the window, pipe in hand, smoke curling upward into the still air. “What’s done?” he asked calmly.

Arjun dropped a folded piece of parchment on the table beside him. The wax seal was already broken — official. “They seized the Golden Elephant. And your flat in Soho. Official decree says—” he glanced down, reading from the paper, “‘property linked to enterprise of illicit and piratical nature, suspected trafficking under foreign embargo, and known associations with hostile foreign traders.’”

Charles exhaled a long breath of smoke. “Pirate smuggler, is it?”

“They’re calling you a menace to the Crown,” Arjun said.

“Only now?” Charles muttered.

He rose from his chair, joints stiff, pipe still between his fingers, and walked out into the garden where flames licked high from the fire pit. Kerpal stood over it with a stick, shifting papers into the heart of the blaze.

“It was bound to come,” Kerpal said without turning. “They never liked a man doing business better than they could.”

He tossed another stack of ledgers into the fire. Ink sizzled as the paper blackened and curled.

“We erase every name,” Charles said. “Every deal. Burn the blood off the money.”

Arjun stepped forward slowly. “What about you?”

Charles was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, “I disappear. No more letters. No more crates. Elephant is dead.”

Kerpal nodded solemnly and threw in another bundle of documents — the old correspondence with Liang Wu. It caught quickly, turning to embers.

“We’ll bury the bones deep, old friend,” Kerpal said.

Charles looked into the fire, eyes steady. “Then let’s start digging.”

Outside, the last light of day flickered behind smoke-streaked clouds. Inside the flames, twenty years of empire turned to ash.

In Calcutta, 1840, Charles Harker disappeared.

One morning, the sun rose over Patna and Kerpal told his household: *"He went to check the trade road to Chittagong. Alone."* That was all. No more details.

The truth was simpler — and far more secret. Charles was hidden in the cellar of Kerpal's modest brick home in a quiet quarter of Calcutta, disguised in the shadows and smoke, his beard grown out, his English suits replaced by loose cottons and linen robes. Only a handful of men knew the truth — Arjun, Kerpal, and a cook whose tongue had long ago been bought with coin and loyalty.

The *rumor*, however, became legend within a week.

"Charles Harker is dead."
"Ambushed on the jungle road."
"Killed by East India Company men."
"No body — just blood in the grass."
"They wanted him gone. Now he is."

Newspapers hinted at the incident, quoting "sources close to the trade underworld." One anonymous column in the *Calcutta Gazette* called him "a ghost of opium's golden age — slain by the very Empire he once outsmarted."

Arjun moved through the city quietly, giving nods and mournful glances. *"He was a good man. Too bold, maybe. But good."*
A few silver rupees passed between hands to ensure the right whispers spread.

By the second month, letters from old buyers began arriving — confused, grieving, suspicious.

Kerpal wrote replies in careful ink:

"Mr. Harker met his end on the road. His legacy is in good hands."

By the fourth month, with no sightings or contradictory news, Kerpal filed a formal death declaration at the colonial magistrate's office in Patna. Witnesses came — old workers from the plantations, one trembling merchant who swore under oath that he saw Charles fall from his horse and vanish in the forest, Company rifles in the distance.

The court stamped the page with solemn finality.

Charles Harker was legally dead.

Downstairs, in Kerpal's cellar, Charles lit his pipe and exhaled toward the flickering oil lamp. He is 60 years old.

“That’s the first time I’ve died,” he muttered.
Kerpal, descending with a tray of rice and chicken, smirked.
“Don’t make it a habit.”
“No promises.”

Outside, the streets carried his memory in hushed tones — a martyr to opium, to empire, to secrets too dangerous to survive. And inside, in silence and shadow, Charles Harker waited.

Somewhere on the road north, India, 1840

The stars hung heavy over the dark road as Charles stepped out of the back door of Kerpal’s house, his shape cloaked in shadow, face weathered, eyes colder than they’d once been. In his arms, a canvas bag with three bricks of Elephant and a pouch of silver and rupee coins.

Kerpal stood by the wagon, reins in hand, the cart rigged to look like a merchant’s haul — crates of onions, dried lentils, a few baskets of gourds, and straw mats carelessly tied down. A hidden compartment beneath the cart’s floor held a small pistol, food, and opium tincture wrapped in cloth.

“Get in,” Kerpal muttered. “We ride through the night. Don’t speak unless I ask.”

Charles gave him a nod and climbed into the back, settling between two crates as Kerpal tossed an old carpet and faded blankets over him. The cart groaned as Kerpal climbed up front, flicked the reins, and the horse began its slow, steady journey through the back roads of Bengal toward the wild frontier of the Northwest.

For days they traveled, avoiding large towns, choosing forest paths and crumbling trade roads long forgotten by officials. Charles rarely emerged from the cart, except at dusk to stretch and sip water from a flask. His beard was full now, his skin sun-darkened. In the few villages they passed, Kerpal played the part of a fruit trader moving goods to his cousin near Lahore.

Bandits watched them from rocks now and then — but saw no value in a tired man with vegetables.

“Almost there,” Kerpal whispered one morning, the road ahead narrowing into scrub hills and brown dust. “The Raj don’t send patrols here. The Company men are afraid of Pashtun arrows.”

They stopped just short of what the map named the *Khyber region*. In reality, there was no line in the sand — just sparser trees, different accents, and hills that swallowed foreigners whole.

Charles stepped down from the wagon. He removed the worn carpet from the crate beside him, lifted a gourd, and beneath it lay the small pack with his three bricks of Elephant and a bundle of coin.

He turned to Kerpal. The two men stood silently.

“I’ll write,” Charles said at last. “From wherever I land.”

Kerpal shook his head. “No. Don’t. No letters. No more paper trails. You vanish now — fully.”

Charles gripped his shoulder. “You are my brother of blood and smoke.”

Kerpal gave a tight smile. “We built something. Burned it. Buried it. Now go. The Elephant walks alone.”

With one final look, Charles turned and began walking down the dust path. Behind him, the cart turned and rolled slowly back toward the east.

He crossed into what was then still India — what the locals knew as Pashtun lands — then into *Peshawar*, where he kept his head down, riding west in a second cart paid for by the last gold coin from his London life.

He asked no names. Took no papers. Moved like a ghost through a cracked land.

His next destination: Afghanistan.

Where no man would think to look for Charles Harker.

The sky had turned copper by the time Kerpal returned home. Dust clung to his turban, and his back ached from the long journey. But his face held no trace of fatigue — only a steady calm earned from years walking the fine line between fields and fire.

His wife had prepared lentils, soft flatbread, and mango pickle. The children gathered quietly, sensing the weight in their father’s silence as he sat and began to eat.

Halfway through the meal, the door burst open.

Six men entered — boots loud on stone, sabers clinking at their sides. The Company crest gleamed on their lapels.

The lead officer, a pale-skinned man with thick mutton chops and an oily accent, stepped forward. “Kerpal Singh?” he asked, though it wasn’t a question.

Kerpal stood. “You’re in my house.”

“We’re here for Charles Harker. You know him.”

Kerpal didn't blink. "He died. There was a witness."

The officer sneered. "Yes, yes, we've read the convenient testimonies. We also know what Suhani Devi's blood says. You were close with her killer. That makes you very interesting."

Kerpal's jaw tightened. "I serve tea to many people. Doesn't mean I slit their throats."

"We'll see what you say after a few long nights," the officer said. He nodded — the other soldiers began tearing the house apart. Clay pots smashed. Bedding flung. Wooden drawers cracked open. One soldier upended a jar of rice, searching for hidden compartments.

Kerpal's youngest child began to cry. His wife reached for her, shielding her from the chaos.

"I'll come," Kerpal said sharply. "Leave the house. Don't scare the children more than you already have."

The officer gave a smirk. "Very noble. Bind him."

Rope wrapped around his wrists. They led him out through the dust, toward the Company compound near the center of Calcutta.

Kerpal sat under a flickering lamp, skin gray with sweat. His turban had been removed, shirt torn. Yet his eyes were still clear.

A younger officer leaned forward. "You know where Harker is ?"

"Not in my memory," Kerpal said quietly. "Nothing more to say."

"Cut the saint act," another snapped. "You forged records, laundered money, built shipping lies with the names of ghosts. We know the warehouses weren't yours."

"Then arrest the ghosts."

The men exchanged looks.

The lead interrogator finally rose. "You'll be released. For now. But you're watched, Singh. You're not the only one with a memory."

He stood, leaned in close.

"And if Harker surfaces again — anywhere — we'll hang him. And then we'll come for you."

Kerpal said nothing.

They cut the rope from his wrists and shoved him toward the door.

Outside, the sun had risen again over Calcutta. And behind his silence, Kerpal knew: Charles Harker had vanished just in time.

Afghanistan

The mountains rolled like frozen waves, dusted with snow at their peaks, while down in the valleys, the land was dry but fertile in the right season — rocky soil with stretches of green, framed by jagged cliffs and olive-colored hills. Poppy thrived in such places, hidden in the folds of remote villages.

Charles rode on the back of a donkey cart, his coat hood drawn against the dust. The driver, a wrinkled man with a sunburned face and kind eyes, spoke no English — but Charles had paid him well and he didn't ask questions.

Each few miles, they switched carts or walked stretches on foot. Charles kept a cloth wrapped around his face, his hair longer now, streaked with gray, blending in with the traders and wanderers who passed through these passes between mountains.

Eventually, he arrived in a modest village tucked near the eastern edge of the Khogyani district, Nangarhar province — a place known to grow poppy for centuries. Goats roamed freely. Stone houses clung to the earth. Children stared. Men watched in silence.

Charles approached a man by a low stone wall who was feeding his donkey. He spoke a few words in Hindustani, and to his relief, the man answered — haltingly, but enough.

"You're far from home," the man said, eyeing him.

"I need a house," Charles replied. "Small one. And land — just a little. To farm."

The man raised an eyebrow. "You bring coin?"

Charles reached into the cloth pouch tied beneath his robe. Silver glinted in his palm.

The man smiled slowly. "Then come. I know someone."

By evening, the deal was struck — a low stone house with a straw roof, a fenced plot of land just outside the village, and the right to till it without interference. Charles handed over fifteen silver coins, keeping the rest hidden beneath a loose board in his floor.

Later, in the village market, he bought rice, lentils, some dried lamb, flatbread, and a clay oil lamp. He paused at one stall, inspecting a folded cloth bundle.

"Seeds?" he asked.

"Afim," the vendor replied. "Good for spring."

Charles nodded and handed over another coin.

He returned to his new home under a sky streaked with violet, lit the lamp, and lay on a straw mat. He hadn't known real silence in years — not like this. No shouting workers. No guards. No deals to make or lies to tell. Just wind across the mountains.

In 1841 The earth cracked easily beneath his hoe. He'd cleared the rocks from the soil weeks ago, and now, row by row, he planted the tiny black seeds — sown not for profit, but for peace.

The wind carried the smell of dust and almond blossoms.

A young boy passed the edge of the field, watching him. Charles nodded.

"Farming," he said simply. "Just farming now."

The boy smiled and ran off.

Charles stood straight, rubbing his sore back, and looked over the little parcel of land.

Afghanistan had taken him in quietly. Perhaps, he thought, it would let him rest.

Months passed. The poppies flowered all at once.

Red and pale pink cups opened under the warm Afghan sun, their thin stems swaying gently as if breathing. The mountains stood quiet in the distance, blue and indifferent, and the air carried the dry sweetness of earth and sap. Charles sat outside his stone house on a simple wooden chair, boots planted in the dust, the small field stretching before him like a final confession.

He took the last brick of Elephant from the cloth bundle at his feet. It was smaller now, shaved down by months of careful use. He broke a piece free with his thumb, packed it into the ivory pipe he had carried across oceans and borders, and struck a flame.

The smoke rose thick and familiar.

He drew in deeply, holding it, feeling the old warmth spread through his chest. When he exhaled, the breath came out slow and pale, dissolving into the air above the flowers. He sat an hour in the sunshine.

The pipe slipped from his fingers and struck the ground softly.

For a moment, nothing moved.

Birds continued their sharp morning calls. A breeze passed through the field, bending the poppies in a single quiet wave. Charles leaned forward slightly, his hands resting on his knees, eyes unfocused.

Then his shoulders sagged.

Minutes passed. No one came. No one called his name.

His eyes closed.

The field remained, red against the brown earth. The wind moved gently through the blossoms, carrying the scent of poppy and dust across the silent land.